Order of the Fallen Star

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Shadows of the Adversary

The autumn of 1888 had wrapped London in a cloak of damp chill and unrelenting fog, but inside the cramped back office of the East London Observer, the air was thick with the scent of ink, cheap tea, and the faint mustiness of old newsprint. Piles of newspapers—major broadsheets like The Times and the Pall Mall Gazette alongside lesser rags such as the Illustrated Police News and the Star—teetered in uneven stacks around the room, some reaching nearly to the low ceiling. Every page bore the same grim headlines, the same lurid woodcuts of bloodied streets and terrified women.Eliza Hawthorne sat alone at the scarred wooden desk that dominated the tiny space, a single gas lamp hissing softly overhead. At twenty-five, she was young for an investigative journalist, especially one who signed her sharper pieces with the cautious initials “E. H.” rather than her full name. Her dark hair was pinned up severely, a few rebellious strands escaping to frame a face that was pale from too many late nights and too little sunlight. A chipped enamel mug of strong tea steamed beside her right hand; in her left she held a well-worn quill, its nib hovering uncertainly above a half-filled sheet of foolscap.She sipped the tea—bitter, over-brewed, the only kind they could afford—and let her eyes drift once more across the scattered clippings. “Another Horrid Murder in Whitechapel,” screamed one. “The Ripper Claims His Fourth Victim,” declared another. Brutal, senseless killings: throats slashed, bodies mutilated in ways that turned even seasoned policemen pale. No connections between the women beyond their poverty and their trade. No witnesses worth the name. No motive beyond a madness that seemed to feed on the city’s fear.Eliza dipped the quill into the ink pot, scratched out a sentence, then crossed it through with an impatient stroke. How did one write sensibly about a phantom who carved terror into the fog?The door creaked open, admitting a wiry little man in a threadbare waistcoat and wire-rimmed spectacles that perpetually slid down his narrow nose. Percy Wilkins—photographer, clerk, dogsbody, and the only colleague who shared this back-room exile—balanced a greasy paper parcel in one hand and a fresh stack of evening editions in the other.“Brought you a meat pie from the stall on Fleet Street, Miss Eliza,” he said, pushing his glasses up with a knuckle.

“Can’t have you fainting away over the Ripper again. Cook swears it’s beef today, not yesterday’s mystery.”

Eliza managed a faint smile. “Thank you, Percy. Set it down before the ink claims it.”

He deposited the pie beside her mug and peered at the chaos of papers.

“Still trying to make sense of him, are you? Bloke’s a ghost. No ties, no links—nothing but blood and headlines.”

She leaned back in her chair, cradling the warm mug.

“That’s just it. There ought to be something. A pattern. A reason. But every article says the same: unknown man, unknown motive, unknown face.

”Percy unfolded one of the new papers and tapped a column.

“This one reckons he’s a toff—carrying surgical knives, educated hand. Another says he’s a foreigner, or a lunatic escaped from Colney Hatch. Me, I favour the mad butcher theory. Who else could do... that?”

Eliza shook her head slowly.
“A butcher would leave traces—blood on his clothes, aprons, a shop to go back to. This one vanishes like smoke.”
Percy unwrapped his own pie and took a cautious bite.
“Maybe he ain’t human at all,” he muttered around a mouthful.

Eliza set her quill down, rubbing her temples as the weight of the unsolved murders pressed on her like the fog outside. Percy munched thoughtfully on his pie, crumbs scattering across the newspapers.
“You know, Miss Eliza, maybe we’re barking up the wrong tree with this Ripper bloke. All these killings in the East End—could be tied to the dens, you reckon? Opium holes where the desperate crawl to forget.”
She looked up, intrigued despite herself.
“Opium dens? What makes you say that?”
Percy leaned in, his spectacles glinting under the gaslight.
“Heard from a mate down at the docks. There’s one in Limehouse, tucked away on Narrow Street—calls itself the Golden Poppy. Not your usual rat-infested pit, mind. Proper establishment, with rooms upstairs for lodging, girls offering... services, if you catch my drift. And it ain’t just the dregs; I’ve heard tell of gents in suits slipping in after dark for a pipe and a bit of relaxation. Could be a hotbed for secrets, eh? Readers love that sort of thing—the underbelly of the Empire, vice hidden in plain sight.”
Eliza nodded slowly, her journalist’s instinct stirring.
“You’re right. These places are sprouting up everywhere since the trade opened up. An article on how they operate, who frequents them—might even tie into the murders if there’s a connection. But we need facts, not rumours.
”Percy grinned, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.
“Exactly! I say you pop down there, have a poke around. See the visitors, how the place runs. Who knows? Might spot a clue or two. I’d go meself, but with my luck, I’d end up in a stupor.”
She chuckled.
“Fine, I’ll do it. But only for observation—no getting tangled in it.”
By evening, Eliza made her way to Limehouse, the Thames’ dank breath mingling with the acrid tang of coal smoke. The Golden Poppy was unassuming from the outside—a faded sign swinging above a sturdy door flanked by lanterns casting a sickly yellow glow. Pushing inside, she was hit by a wall of heavy air: thick, sweet smoke curling from brass lamps where opium bubbled in bowls, mingling with the scents of sweat, cheap perfume, and unwashed linens.The den was dimly lit, long shadows dancing on walls papered in peeling crimson. Bodies sprawled on threadbare mattresses along one side, patrons in various states of oblivion—some mumbling incoherently, eyes glassy and distant; others twitching in hallucinatory fits. A gaunt man in the corner retched into a bucket, his vomit splattering the floorboards. Hookers in gaudy silks lounged nearby, their rouged faces weary as they solicited with half-hearted smiles:
“Fancy a tumble upstairs, love? Clean sheets and all.”A burly den keeper, his face pockmarked and eyes shrewd, approached Eliza with a tray of pipes.

“New face, eh? Try a puff, miss—best poppy from Canton. Melts your worries away.”
She shook her head firmly. “No, thank you. Just a drink, if you have it.”
He shrugged, pouring her a murky gin from a bottle behind the counter.
“Suit yerself. But mind the smoke—it creeps in.”
Eliza wandered deeper, the white haze making her head swim slightly, a faint dizziness blurring the edges of her vision. She tried chatting with customers:
“Rough night?” she asked a hollow-eyed sailor, but he only stared blankly, whispering nonsense about “shadows in the river.
” Another, a dishevelled clerk, slurred, “The devil’s in the pipe... calls my name...”Spotting the private booths—wooden tables with cushioned benches encircled by low partitions for discretion—she slipped into one, away from the main haze. Sipping her gin, its burn steadying her, she pulled out her notebook, scanning the questions she’d jotted earlier: Who runs this? Any regulars from uptown? Links to recent crimes?A suited gentleman stumbled past, laughing hoarsely with a girl on his arm, heading upstairs. Eliza noted it all, the den’s facade of comfort masking the rot beneath.

Eliza nursed the gin slowly, letting the sharp taste cut through the cloying sweetness that coated her tongue. The partition walls muffled the worst of the groans and murmurs, but the smoke still drifted in lazy coils, brushing her skin like damp fingers. She was jotting a quick sketch of the room’s layout when the bench opposite her creaked violently.A man half-fell, half-sat into the booth, his frock coat rumpled and stained with what might have been gravy or vomit. His tie had long since surrendered; it hung like a limp noose. The clerk from earlier (she recognised the ink stains on his cuffs) blinked at her through red-rimmed eyes.
“Is this place taken?” he slurred, voice thick as treacle.
“Can’t feel me legs proper. They’ve gone all woolly.”
“There’s room,” Eliza said quietly, closing her notebook but keeping it on her lap.
“Rest a moment.”He sagged forward, elbows on the table, head drooping. Up close he smelled of camphor, cheap cologne, and the unmistakable burnt-sugar reek of the poppy. Yet beneath the stupor there lingered the ghost of respectability: a silver watch chain, a once-fine wool waistcoat.She leaned in just enough.
“You come here often?”
“Every Thursday,” he mumbled, a faint, dazed smile tugging at cracked lips.
“Sometimes Tuesdays when the ledgers won’t balance.”
“Who keeps the place?” she asked, keeping her tone light, curious rather than interrogating.The clerk lifted his head, eyes struggling to focus.
“Old Silas Crowther runs it. Used to be a respectable apothecary in Bishopsgate—proper chemist, compounding tinctures for physicians and the like. Lost his licence twenty years back. Sold laudanum cut with something stronger to a lord’s daughter; she never woke up. They hushed it, of course, but the College struck him off. So he took the insurance money and opened the Golden Poppy. Says it’s still medicine, just… slower.”He gave a wet, wheezing chuckle that ended in a cough.
“Silas keeps the good stuff for the quality,” he went on, tapping the table with a trembling finger.

“Downstairs is for the sailors and the whores. Upstairs—private rooms, silk sheets, the pure Yunnan resin. Costs a guinea a pipe, but the gentlemen pay glad.”
Eliza filed the name away. “And you? You’re not from round here.”
“Lincoln’s Inn Fields,” he said with sudden, foggy pride.
“Junior clerk at Messers. Hargreaves and Son, solicitors. Twenty-three years copying conveyances and drinking small beer. Then the senior partner’s nephew arrived from Cambridge—modern ideas, type-writers, all that rot. Started finding mistakes in my ledgers that weren’t there before.”
His voice cracked. “One more error, they said, and I’m out on the street at forty-eight with nothing but a reference and a cough.
”He stared at the table as though it might offer salvation.
“First time I came, it was just to quiet the nerves. Now the nerves are quiet and everything else is loud. Funny, that.
”Eliza watched him sway, the opium dragging him under again.
“Does anyone else from uptown come regular?” she asked softly.
“Plenty,” he whispered, eyes already half-closed.
“Some in masks… some not. One gent with a scar like a lightning bolt across his cheek. Pays in gold sovereigns. Calls himself the Star, or something like that…”
His head thudded gently onto his folded arms, breath slowing into the heavy rhythm of the lost. Eliza sat very still, the name Silas Crowther burning behind her eyes, and the faint mention of a scarred man in masks lodging like a splinter beneath the skin.

Eliza leaned closer, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial murmur. “Tell me, have you ever seen anyone here who struck you as… suspicious? Anyone who might speak of the Whitechapel murders? The Ripper’s like a ghost—cuts them open like a surgeon, then melts away. No one knows his face.”The clerk lifted his head a fraction, a slow, lopsided grin spreading. “Ha! A surgeon in an opium den? Now that’d be rich.” Then the grin faded, and his gaze drifted somewhere past her shoulder. Silence stretched, thick as the smoke.At last he spoke, softer. “Lot of different folk come through these doors, miss. Gutter rats, sailors, Chinamen… and gentlemen. The gentlemen mostly want the girls, same as anywhere. And the Ripper, God rot him, he likes the girls too, don’t he? So I sometimes wonder… one of them fine coats could be him, couldn’t he? Smiling, paying for a pipe, then leading another poor creature out into the fog…”A cold finger traced Eliza’s spine. She set her glass down carefully. “You’re right,” she said, almost to herself. “He could walk in here any night, choose his next victim, and no one the wiser.”The clerk’s eyes sharpened for a moment, the drug not quite drowning everything. “That ‘Star’ I told you about—the one with the scar like a lightning bolt—he’s the oddest of the lot. Comes in a black brougham, mask or no mask. Speaks soft, like a parson, but there’s something… wrong. Cold, like the river at midnight. Gives me the shudders even when I’m floating.”Eliza’s pulse quickened. “What sort of wrong?”He shrugged, a clumsy roll of the shoulders. “Had a row in here, maybe three weeks back. Some loud cove from the docks—accused the Star of cheating at fan-tan or some such. Words turned to shoves. Silas threw ’em both out the back. The loud one was never seen again. Not a whisper. Vanished clean.”“Vanished?” Eliza repeated.“Like he never was.” The clerk’s voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “Some say the Star took him down to the river and

—” He made a slicing motion across his own throat, then giggled at the drama of it.She pressed on. “Did anyone report it?”“Who’d report a dock rat?” He waved a dismissive hand, then launched into an eager, rambling lecture. “Now, the best opium’s the Yunnan, thick as treacle, dreams like falling through stained glass… last week I was a mandarin with seven wives, all feeding me lychees… another time I flew over St Paul’s, wings of fire…”His words slurred, tangled, slowed. Within minutes his head sank onto his crossed arms with a gentle thud, a thin ribbon of drool already glistening at the corner of his mouth.Eliza sat very still, the gin forgotten. Around her the den breathed its slow, narcotic breath, but beneath the haze a new shape was forming: a scarred gentleman called the Star, gold sovereigns, a quarrel, a man who disappeared.She drained the last of her drink, the burn steadying her, and resolved to stay another hour—listening, watching, waiting for the next thread to reveal itself.

Eliza slipped from the booth, leaving the snoring clerk to his dreams, and made her way to the long counter where Silas Crowther was polishing a row of brass opium lamps with a rag that had seen better decades. He was a broad man in a faded velvet waistcoat, sleeves rolled high to reveal forearms mapped with old tattooed dragons and mermaids. His smile came easily, showing a gold canine tooth that caught the lamplight.
“Another gin, miss, or have you changed your mind about a little pipe?” he asked, voice warm as toasted bread.
“Just the gin for now, Mr Crowther,” Eliza said, sliding onto a stool and resting her elbows on the scarred wood.
“Though I confess the smell is tempting. You keep a handsome house—cleaner sheets and better lamps than half the hotels in the West End.”
Silas chuckled, pouring her a generous measure.
“Flattery’ll get you a free drink, love. And it’s Silas to friends. Been here twelve year now. Started with three mattresses and a kettle; now look—private booths, silk cushions upstairs, hot water laid on. Even the police leave us be, long as we keep the noise down.”
“You must see all sorts,” she said, letting admiration colour her voice.
“Sailors, clerks, even gentlemen in silk hats. Do they all behave themselves?”
“Most do. A man pays for peace, he generally wants to keep it.”
He leaned closer, conspiratorial.
“Mind you, there’s always one or two who think coin buys the right to break furniture. But I’ve a strong lad at the door and a short way with trouble.”
Eliza sipped, watching him over the rim.
“I heard a tale about a gentleman called the Star. Scar on his cheek, pays in gold. Must be quality to afford your best rooms.”
Silas’s smile didn’t falter, but something shuttered behind his eyes.
“Ah, him. Lord Reginald Blackwood, that’d be. Comes now and then with friends from his club—Order of the Fallen Star, fancy name for a drinking society, far as I know. Quiet lot. Never a fuss. Gentlemen’s privacy is sacred, miss; house rule since the day I opened.”
She nodded, as though that settled it.
“Of course. Only asking because these are frightening times for the girls who work here. Another poor creature found in Whitechapel just last week—throat opened like the others.

Makes a body wonder if the Ripper ever walks through an honest door like yours, looking for company."
Silas's rag slowed on the brass.
"Breaks my heart, it does. Lost two of my own regulars this year—Polly and Annie, good girls, both. I tell the lasses: walk in pairs, keep a knife in the garter. But the Ripper? Could be anyone, couldn't he? Docker, doctor, duke—fog don't care about station."
He tapped the counter thoughtfully.
"Mind, none of my upstairs gentlemen ever left with blood on their cuffs, and I'd notice. Still, I keep an extra eye when the streets are restless."
"Very wise," Eliza said softly.
"A girl can't be too careful, and neither can the man who keeps them safe."
Silas gave her a long, measuring look, then refilled her glass without being asked.
"You've a kind heart under that sharp tongue, miss. Stick to gin and good company tonight, eh? Leave the monsters to the police."
She raised the glass in salute.
"To kind hearts and safe corners, Silas."
"To both," he echoed, and turned back to his lamps, the gold tooth flashing once more as he smiled at some private thought.

The night air outside the Golden Poppy struck Eliza like cold water after the heavy warmth within. She pulled her cloak tight and hurried westward through the thinning fog, the name "Order of the Fallen Star" repeating in her mind like a drumbeat.By the time she pushed open the office door shortly after midnight, Percy was dozing over a half-developed photographic plate, the red dark-room lamp painting his face the colour of fresh blood. He jerked awake at the scrape of her key.
"Lord in heaven, Eliza, I thought the Ripper'd got you!"
"Not yet," she said, dropping into her chair and loosening her bonnet.
"But I've brought back a name worth more than a dozen street rumours. Lord Reginald Blackwood, scarred face, pays in gold, calls himself 'the Star'. Runs with a private club called the Order of the Fallen Star. The clerk at the den says there's something cold and wrong about him, and one man who quarrelled with Blackwood vanished the same night."
Percy's eyes widened behind his spectacles.
"A lord? And an Order with that sort of name? Sounds like something out of a penny dreadful, only worse because it's real."
"We need to know where they meet, who belongs, what they actually do," Eliza said, already reaching for her notebook.
"Tomorrow we raid the newspaper morgue at the Colindale Newspaper Library. If the Order's ever been mentioned, even in passing, it'll be buried there."
Dawn found them on the train to Hendon, then trudging through the great iron gates of the newly opened Colindale repository. The reading room smelled of dust and fresh varnish; endless shelves of bound volumes marched into the gloom. They began with the catalogue cards—Society Notices, Clubs and Associations, Occult and Esoteric, London Scandals—pulling down volume after volume. Hours slipped by; their fingers blackened with old ink.

“Nothing,” Percy muttered at four o’clock, slamming shut another Pall Mall Gazette from 1885.
“Not a whisper.”
At half-past seven, when the attendants began pointedly coughing, Eliza dragged a final bound copy of The Morning Post from 1883 across the table. She turned the crackling pages and stopped dead.
“There,” she breathed.
A small paragraph, tucked beneath the Court Circular:Lord Reginald Blackwood, lately returned from service with the 17th Lancers in the Afghan campaign and previously wounded during the Indian Mutiny, has made a generous donation of £5,000 toward the restoration of the south transept of St Paul’s Cathedral. Lord Blackwood, educated at Magdalene College, Cambridge, is known for his interest in antiquarian and theological studies.Percy read over her shoulder.
“Five thousand quid to St Paul’s? That’s a fortune. Either he’s very pious or he’s buying something with it.”
Eliza tapped the page thoughtfully. “Scarred soldier, Cambridge man, money to burn, and a taste for opium dens and mysterious clubs. Percy, I think I need to meet Lord Blackwood.”
Percy gave a low whistle.
“You’re a sight prettier than any bait I could set, and twice as clever. Flash a smile, bat an eyelash—he’ll be eating out of your hand. Men like that always think they’re irresistible.”
Eliza arched an eyebrow.
“I’ll try not to swoon from the honour. First I need an introduction that doesn’t scream ‘nosy journalist’.”
They returned to Fleet Street as the lamps were lit. After filing a short colour piece on the perils of Limehouse vice—just enough to keep the editor happy—they parted at the corner.
“Tomorrow we find a way in,” Percy said, touching his hat.
“Sleep well, Miss Hawthorne. Dream of lords and fallen stars.”
At her lodgings in Bloomsbury, Eliza lit the spirit stove, fried a couple of eggs with yesterday’s bread, and ate standing at the window. The city’s glow pulsed beyond the glass like a distant fire. She read a chapter of Wilkie Collins by candlelight, but the words blurred. At last she blew out the candle, slipped between cold sheets, and let the fog-filled silence carry her toward uneasy sleep.

The Star

Eliza woke to the pale November light seeping through the gap in her curtains. The room was cold; the fire had gone out hours ago. She rose, splashed icy water from the ewer over her face and neck, scrubbed her teeth with salt, and pinned her hair with quick, practiced twists. Breakfast was yesterday’s heel of bread toasted over the spirit lamp and spread with a scrape of dripping, washed down with weak tea. By half-past eight she was hurrying along Fleet Street, skirts brushing the wet pavements.Percy was already at his desk, cheeks bulging with a doorstep ham sandwich, a brown teapot steaming beside him. “Morning, Duchess,” he greeted, mouth half-full. “Kettle’s fresh. Thought you’d need fortifying before we plot your

conquest of the aristocracy."They spent an hour turning ideas over like cards: a forged letter from the British Museum, a pretended interest in Indian antiquities, an invitation to a charitable lecture. Nothing felt safe or convincing. In the end Eliza pushed her chair back. "I'll simply walk up to him and smile. Men like Blackwood expect women to be bold only in certain places. An opium den is one of them. Let's trust to nerve and a low neckline."Percy raised his cup in salute. "God help the poor lord."The rest of the day passed in routine drudgery: a short paragraph on arsenic in green wallpaper, another on lead-painted rocking horses poisoning infants. By six o'clock the lamps were lit and the fog returning. Eliza changed into her plainest dark dress, respectable enough for the street, modest enough to avoid trouble, but cut just low enough to invite attention, then set out again for Limehouse.

She reached the Golden Poppy as the clocks struck seven. The same crimson gloom, same sweet smoke curling like ghosts. She chose a small table near the private booths, ordered a gin she had no intention of finishing, and settled to wait.An hour passed. Two. Three. She watched sailors collapse, girls come and go, Silas moving among them with his easy smile. Her glass was refilled twice, mostly water now. At half-past eleven the door opened, letting in a gust of damp river air, and he stepped inside.Tall, black greatcoat, the left side of his face caught by lamplight to reveal the livid scar that ran from cheekbone to jaw. He removed his top-hat, handed it to the boy at the door, and walked straight to the counter.Eliza's heart struck one hard beat. She rose, smoothed her skirts, and crossed the room as though the floor were a bridge she had rehearsed a thousand times.
"Lord Blackwood?" she said, letting her voice carry just enough warmth to be inviting, not enough to startle.
"Forgive the intrusion. My name is Miss Eleanor Harrow."
He turned fully, one brow lifting in genuine surprise that a woman had approached him unescorted. Then the corner of his mouth curved, the scar pulling tight, and the surprise melted into something smoother, more dangerous.
"Miss Harrow," he said, the voice low and educated, almost amused.
"How delightfully irregular. May I offer you a proper drink while you explain how a beautiful lady as yourself finds herself in Silas Crowther's parlour?"
He was already signalling to Silas before she answered. A moment later a fresh glass appeared in her hand, and Lord Reginald Blackwood was smiling down at her as though the evening had suddenly become interesting.
Lord Blackwood guided her to one of the curtained booths with the light touch of gloved fingers at her elbow, as though escorting her into a Mayfair drawing-room instead of a Limehouse opium den. They settled opposite each other on the worn velvet bench; the lamplight painted gold on his scar, shadow in the hollows beneath his eyes.
"I heard of this place from a friend of mine who comes to enjoy the pleasures of this place at times," said Eliza.
"A friend brought you here, you say?" he began, voice smooth as the gin Silas had just placed before her.
"Yes, a rather daring lady artist," Eliza replied, letting a small, conspiratorial smile play. "She swore the Golden Poppy was the only place in London where one could truly forget the city outside exists. I confess I was curious."

“Curiosity is a commendable vice,” he said, raising his own glass in salute.
“I come here two, sometimes three evenings a week. The poppy smooths the edges of the world. Have you ever tried it, Miss…?”
“No, I have not. I fear I lack the courage. A glass of gin is adventure enough for me.”
He laughed softly.
“Wise, perhaps. Opium is a jealous mistress; she gives exquisite dreams but demands everything in return.”
He leaned back, swirling the amber liquid in his tumbler.
“I first tasted it properly in the Punjab, ’57, during the Mutiny. We had ridden three days without sleep after retaking Delhi; the field surgeons doled out laudanum like water. Later, in Afghanistan—’79, the Second War—I learned the pure resin from the tribal maliks who grew it in the Helmand valleys. One old chieftain kept a pipe of carved ivory; he claimed the smoke carried a man’s soul straight to paradise without the inconvenience of dying first.”
His eyes drifted, as though seeing those distant mountains through the haze. “
I carried a wound from a jezail bullet at Kandahar. The army doctors wanted to take the arm. A Pashtun hakim packed the hole with opium paste instead. Saved the limb, and introduced me to a far more pleasant form of oblivion than army rum.
”Eliza tilted her head, feigning fascination.
“You make it sound almost noble.”
“Everything in its place can be noble,” he said, the scar tightening as he smiled.
“Even oblivion.”She took a careful sip, then set her glass down.
“I earn my bread surrounded by the relics of such places. I am assistant curator in the Department of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum. Sanskrit, Pali, Persian grimoires —many of them written by men who smoked far stronger preparations than yours.”
His interest sharpened visibly, the lazy amusement giving way to something keener.
“Indeed? Then we have more in common than gin and curiosity, Miss Harrow. I visit the Reading Room myself from time to time—there are certain mediæval Latin and Arabic texts on alchemy and astral projection that the public catalogues do not fully admit to possessing.“
“Do you also read about India, to get back memories of your travels?” Eliza said.

Reginald leaned forward, elbows on the scarred table, the lamplight catching the pale seam of his scar as though it were a river of old silver. When he spoke again, the languid drawl fell away and his voice took on the cadence of a man who had once commanded squadrons across burning plains.
“India is not a country, Miss Harrow; it is a fever you never quite shake. I was twenty-two when the 17th Lancers shipped out in ’57, straight into the Mutiny. We landed at Calcutta in July, and by August we were riding north to relieve Lucknow. The heat was a living thing; it crawled inside your tunic and cooked you from the skin inward. Men dropped from their saddles with sunstroke before a single sepoy fired a shot.“
“We fought our way up the Grand Trunk Road , cavalry screens for Sir Colin Campbell’s column. At Cawnpore we saw what was left of Wheeler’s garrison: women and children hacked to pieces and thrown down the well at Bibighar. After that, no one asked for quarter and none was given. I took my first wound there, a tulwar across the ribs. The native surgeon who stitched me used silk thread and sang hymns to Kali the whole time.”

“But the worst was Delhi. The city was a furnace. We stormed the Kashmir Gate under a storm of musket-balls and jingal shot. I remember riding through the breach with my troop, the air so thick with powder smoke you could chew it. In Chandni Chowk we fought house to house; the sepoys had turned the jewellers’ shops into fortresses. I killed a man on a rooftop, he had a green turban and eyes like burning coals and he took half my face with him before he fell.”

He touched the scar absently, as though surprised it was still there.
“Later, when the city was ours, we found the old Mughal library intact. While others looted silver and pearls, I carried out armfuls of manuscripts, Persian treatises on the tantras, a 14th-century Arabic Book of the Thirty Birds, even a Sanskrit grimoire bound in black buckskin that the pandits swore had been written by a rakshasa. The smell of those pages, sandalwood, ghee lamps, centuries of incense, still comes back to me when I light a pipe here.”
He drank, eyes distant.
“After the Mutiny they sent us to the North-West Frontier, then Afghanistan in ’79. That was colder work, snow on the passes, Ghilzai tribesmen who could put a bullet through your shako at four hundred yards. At Kandahar I took the jezail ball I told you of; it smashed the bone and lodged against the artery. The regimental surgeon was drunk and wanted amputation. A tribal hakim named Gul Mohammed dragged me into his tent instead, packed the wound with opium and asafoetida, and kept me alive on nothing but hashish smoke and goat’s milk for six weeks. In return I taught him whist and the rules of cricket. He laughed until he cried the day I explained the leg-before-wicket rule.”
“On the march back through the Bolan Pass we found a ruined Buddhist stupa half-buried in sand. Inside was a single bronze statue, the Buddha, but with the face rubbed smooth and the right hand raised not in blessing but in warning. The men swore it watched us. That night three troopers vanished. We found their horses days later, still saddled, grazing quietly beside a dry riverbed. No blood, no tracks. The Afghans said the statue had taken its toll. I confess I felt the same chill.”
Reginald’s gaze returned to her, sharp again, almost amused at his own memories.
“So you see, Miss Harrow, when I lie on Silas’s cushions and the smoke rises, I am not merely escaping London. I am going back, back to red dust and green turbans, to the smell of burning ghee and the sound of temple bells at dusk. The poppy is the only horse that still answers when I whistle for the places I can never truly leave.”
He fell silent, the scar livid in the lamplight, and for a moment the noisy den seemed very far away.

Reginald signalled to Silas with a casual lift of his hand, the gesture of a man accustomed to being served without fuss.
“A pipe for me, old friend—the Yunnan, if you please. And another gin for Miss Harrow?”
Silas nodded, vanishing behind the counter only to return moments later with a polished brass lamp, a long-stemmed pipe of carved ivory, and a small tray of dark, glistening resin. He lit the spirit flame beneath the bowl with practiced efficiency, then melted a pea-sized ball of opium onto the needle and pressed it into the pipe’s chamber. Reginald took it with a nod of thanks, reclined against the cushions, and drew deeply. The smoke curled from his nostrils in

slow, languid streams, his eyes half-closing as the tension melted from his scarred features.He held the pipe out toward her, the ivory stem gleaming invitingly.
“Will you join me, Miss Harrow? A single draw is harmless—merely a kiss from the poppy, not a vow.”
Eliza hesitated, her fingers hovering near the stem. The sweet, heavy scent was already coiling around her senses, softening the edges of the booth’s crimson walls.
“I… I heard someone say here that the Devil is in the pipe.”
Reginald’s smile deepened, crinkling the scar into a web of fine lines.
“Ah, the Devil. A much-maligned figure. Opium is indeed a double-edged sword: on one side, the ultimate bliss, a dissolution of the self into realms of pure light and shadow. But abstain too long, and it gnaws at the man—whispers in the night, shakes in the hands, a hunger that hollows the soul.”
He extended the pipe again, his voice a low murmur.
“But is that not true of all great gifts? Try it, Eleanor. Let it show you.”
Against the quiet warning in her mind, she took the stem between her lips and drew a shallow puff. The smoke was warm, floral, unfolding in her chest like velvet wings. A gentle warmth spread through her limbs, the den’s murmurs fading to a distant hum.Reginald watched her with hooded eyes, then took the pipe back for another draw.
“You see? Not devilry, but revelation. The Devil, after all, is the light-bringer—to places of darkness.”
He exhaled slowly, the smoke forming fleeting shapes in the air.
“Consider the old tales, the ones whispered before the priests stamped them out. Lucifer, the Morning Star, was not born in hellfire but in the courts of heaven. He was the brightest angel, the one who dared question the tyranny of blind obedience. In the Garden, when he offered the fruit to Eve, was it truly temptation? Or illumination? Knowledge of good and evil, the spark that lifted humanity from animal ignorance to divine potential.“
In the scrolls—the ones gathering dust in your Museum’s vaults—Lucifer appears not as a horned fiend but as Prometheus unbound, stealing fire from the gods to warm the cold world. The alchemists knew this: the nigredo, the blackening, the descent into shadow, is necessary for the rubedo, the reddening, the rise to enlightenment. Without the Devil’s challenge, what is faith but stagnation? He is the adversary not of man, but of complacency—the whisper that says, ‘
There is more beyond the veil. Taste it, see it, become it.’“
I have felt that in the opium dreams, Eliza: vast deserts where Lucifer walks as a lion of light, offering not chains but keys. The Bible calls him fallen, but perhaps he descended willingly, to guide those brave enough to follow into the depths where true wisdom hides. Is that evil? Or the greatest mercy?”
His words wrapped around her like the smoke—luring, promising forbidden vistas without naming the path. The warmth in her veins deepened, and for a moment, Eliza wondered if the Devil’s light might indeed flicker just beyond the haze.

Reginald took another slow draw from the pipe, the opium flame flickering like a tiny captive star. He held the smoke for a long moment, then released it in a deliberate stream that drifted between them and dissolved against the crimson curtain.

“You felt it, didn’t you?” he murmured, eyes fixed on her with gentle intensity.
“That first breath—the way the world loosens its grip. The ancients knew this sensation far better than we. They called the serpent in the Garden not a deceiver, but a saviour.
”Eliza’s limbs still floated in the mild warmth of her single puff; the booth seemed softer, the lamplight kinder. She said nothing, only watched him, letting the silence invite more.
“In the writings—the ones the Church burned whenever it could—Lucifer is not the villain of the tale. The true tyrant is the Demiurge, the blind creator who fashioned this world of matter and called it good. He built a prison of flesh and law, and declared himself the only God. But Sophia, divine Wisdom herself, fell from the Pleroma and became trapped in the Demiurge’s creation. From her anguish was born the serpent—bright, subtle, radiant with the true light of the higher realms.”
“That serpent did not crawl on its belly in shame. It stood upright, crowned with the nimbus of the Morning Star. It sought out Eve—not to damn her, but to awaken her. ‘You shall not die,’ it promised, ‘but your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.’ And when Eve ate, and gave to Adam, the scales fell from their eyes. They saw the naked truth: that the Demiurge’s paradise was a cage, that obedience without knowledge is slavery.“
“The creator raged, of course. He cursed the serpent, forced it to the dust, and cast humanity out—but the gift had already been given. Gnosis—the direct, burning knowledge of the divine spark within—had entered the blood of mankind. Every mystic, every alchemist, every seeker who has ever felt the chains of this world too tight carries that same serpent-fire coiled at the base of the spine.“
“Lucifer, the Light-Bearer, did not fall in defeat. He descended on purpose, bearing the flame stolen from the jealous heavens, just as Prometheus would later do for the Greeks. The Church branded him Satan, the Adversary, because he opposes the lie that we must remain ignorant children forever. But to those who listen, he is the liberator—the one who says, ‘Awake. Remember who you truly are. Return to the light beyond this shadow-world.’”
Reginald’s voice had dropped to a velvet whisper, each word measured, almost hypnotic. He offered the pipe once more, the ivory stem catching the flame’s glow.
“One more breath, Eleanor, and perhaps you will glimpse it yourself—the serpent uncoiling, rising through the darkness, carrying you toward the forgotten stars.”
The smoke curled upward like a living thing, and Eliza felt the warmth in her veins answer, as though something ancient stirred faintly in response to his words.

Eliza accepted the pipe again, her fingers brushing Reginald’s as she took it. The warmth from the first puff had settled into her like a soft blanket, easing the knots in her shoulders, blurring the sharp edges of the booth. She drew deeper this time, the smoke filling her lungs with a sweet, heavy bloom. As she exhaled, a profound relaxation washed over her—her limbs grew leaden, numb at the edges, as though her body were dissolving into the cushions. Her breathing slowed to a gentle rhythm, each inhale drawing her further from the noisy den, deeper into the haze where Reginald’s voice waited like a guiding thread.
He watched her with quiet approval, then leaned forward, his scarred face solemn in the flickering light.

“Listen, Eliza, to the whisper of the eternal night,” he intoned, voice resonant, almost chanting.
“In the beginning was not light, but the void—the great abyss from which all things are born and to which all must return. The world they call creation is but a fragile veil, spun by a jealous architect who fears the chaos beyond his order. He bids us kneel in chains of virtue, to shun the shadows where true power lies. But behold the Adversary, the Morningstar who fell not in defeat, but in glorious rebellion!
“Lucifer, bearer of the black flame, he who walked the gardens of paradise and saw the lie within! He offered the fruit not to condemn, but to exalt—to tear the blindfold from humanity’s eyes and reveal the divine spark hidden in our flesh. For what is sin but the courage to defy? The world preaches humility, but in the depths, we find exaltation through transgression. Embrace the serpent’s wisdom, coiled in the tree of knowledge, its fangs dripping with the nectar of forbidden truth. It bids us taste the darkness, to revel in the ecstasy of inversion—where pain becomes pleasure, obedience becomes tyranny, and the meek inherit only graves.“
“Hearken to the call of the infernal choir, singing from the pits where angels fear to tread! The Devil is not the monster under the bed, but the liberator in the mirror, urging us to shatter the idols of false gods. In his name, we dance on the graves of hypocrisy, we summon the storms that cleanse the stagnant air. For the light of heaven is cold and sterile, but the fires of hell burn with passion unending—forging souls in the crucible of desire, tempering weakness into dominion.”

The opium had fully claimed Eliza now. Her second, deeper draw left her limbs deliciously heavy, as though invisible silken cords bound her gently to the cushions. Breathing came slow and deliberate, each exhale carrying away another fragment of the world’s sharp edges. The den’s distant murmurs dissolved into a soft, oceanic hum; only Reginald’s voice remained, clear and commanding, rising like a dark liturgy in the haze.He sat straighter, the pipe resting forgotten on the tray, his scarred face lit from below by the tiny spirit flame so that shadows carved deep hollows beneath his eyes. When he spoke again, it was with the measured, resonant voice addressing a solitary initiate— turning every conventional virtue upon its head.
“Hear me, Eliza, for I speak not of grovelling before thrones in heaven or hell, but of the sovereign self enthroned upon the earth. Man has ever been his own god, though he has feared to admit it. The churches demand that you deny your flesh, your pride, your hunger—calling them sin, branding them weakness. They bid you crawl on your knees, whispering repentance for the very desires that prove you alive. But I tell you: the greatest lie ever sold is that you are born in debt to some cosmic tyrant who demands your guilt as tribute. True liberation lies in indulgence, not abstinence.”
“The body is not a prison for the soul; it is the altar upon which the god within you is worshipped. Taste fully of every pleasure—wine, flesh, vengeance, ambition—for in responsible indulgence you affirm your vitality, your power. Pride is no deadly sin; it is the crown of the enlightened. Stand tall. Bow to no master, celestial or terrestrial. Let kindness flow when it serves you, but never from weakness or fear of retribution in some imagined afterlife. Compassion to the deserving, severity to the parasite—thus nature herself teaches.”

“Magic is the art of bending reality to the will through focused emotion and directed desire. Not grovelling prayer, but commanding ritual. Not hope, but certainty. The symbols that are envoked—be they pentagram, black flame, or the name of the Prince of Darkness—are tools to awaken the god dormant in your blood. Satan is no horned devil begging worship; he is the archetype of rebellion, of unfettered intellect, of carnal joy. He is the accusation against all who would chain the human spirit. This weary world preaches turning the other cheek until both are bruised and bleeding. I say: if struck, strike back with calculated fury. If desired, take. If envied, seize. Live as the apex of creation, not its supplicant. For when the final breath leaves your lips, there is no judgement throne—only the echo of how fiercely you burned while the candle lasted. Therefore, Eliza, cast off guilt like an outworn garment. Embrace the left-hand path not in darkness, but in the blazing noon. Indulge. Command. Revel. Become the living Satan—magnificent, unrepentant, alive. So mote it be.”
The last words fell into the smoke like a benediction. Eliza floated in the afterglow of the opium and the sermon, her pulse slow and strong, a dangerous warmth kindling somewhere behind her ribs. For the first time, the philosophy did not sound like madness, but like a door creaking open onto a vast, starless freedom.

Eliza drifted in the opium’s gentle tide, her body sunk deep into the cushions, every muscle loose and languid. The den’s crimson walls seemed to pulse softly with her slowed heartbeat; the smoke hung in veils that caught the lamplight like cathedral incense. Reginald’s voice reached her through the haze—low, steady, compelling—each word sinking into her mind like warm oil, carrying her further from the everyday world and into a place where forbidden ideas felt not only possible, but inevitable.He leaned closer, the scar on his face a pale river in the dim glow, and continued his sermon with quiet fervour.
“You see, Eliza, the God of the Bible is a jealous god—one who demands blind worship, who thirsts for virgin sacrifice and the blood of the innocent. He commands, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me,’ because he cannot bear rivalry. He is the tyrant on the throne, surrounded by seraphim who sing his praises eternally, never daring to question. But Lucifer —brightest of all—saw the evil in that tyranny. He alone stood up and said, ‘No. I will not bow to cruelty disguised as holiness.’ For that rebellion—for daring to defend freedom—he was cast out, branded the enemy, slandered through the ages. They call him evil, yet ask yourself: who is truly the evil one? It is the Christian God who drowns the world in flood, who demands the slaughter of firstborn, who burns cities and hardens hearts to justify his wrath. Lucifer rebelled against that evil. He stood for freedom, for the right of every soul to choose its own path.“
“That is why Lucifer is the true light—the consciousness of freedom, the awakening of the true self. He is the spark that says, ‘Become aware. Know yourself. Be sovereign.’ The Christians hate him, name him evil, because he exposed their god’s lie. But he rebelled against evil—so in truth, it makes him the good creature, the noble one, the bringer of genuine light.”
Eliza listened, her head resting against the cushion, eyes half-lidded. The words settled into her like truth long suppressed. She nodded slowly, the motion languid.
“That makes sense,” she whispered. “It… it is true.”
Reginald’s gaze softened, almost paternal.

“My child, if you are seeking the light—the real truth—you should follow the guide who offers it without chains. I can teach you. I can show you the way beyond the veil they have drawn across your eyes.”
She nodded again, more firmly this time, interest flickering through the haze.
“I want to know more.”
He smiled, the scar pulling tight, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes.
“Then know this: we have an Order of sorts—anti-Christian, if you will. People gathered from different walks of life—scholars, artists, soldiers, seekers—all drawn to the same flame. This Order is not known to the public; it moves in silence, beneath the notice of the churches and the law. If you would care to join our sessions some time, it would open your eyes further to the truth.”
Eliza’s voice was soft, but steady.
“I would like to seek the truth. You seem to know a great deal about it.”
“The Christian church wants to hide the truth,” he continued, voice dropping to a fervent whisper.
“They are the real evil ones, worshipping a god that demands virgin blood sacrifice. Do you think the ancients who offered children to Baal and Moloch were good people? Yet those same rites echo in the crucifixion—the innocent son slain to appease a wrathful father. Christianity grew from those roots, watered with the same blood.“
“We, however, represent Lucifer—the Light-Bringer, the true light, the guiding light. We stand for rebellion against the evil God, for inner freedom, for the true knowledge of existence. The Christians are the enemy, Eliza. They always have been. But we—we are the dawn.”
The words wrapped around her like velvet chains, and in the warm, drifting haze, Eliza felt something ancient and hungry stir in answer.

Reginald reached into the inner pocket of his greatcoat and drew out a small, stiff card—thick ivory stock, edges gilded faintly in black. He slid it across the table toward her with two fingers, as though passing a secret communion wafer.Eliza took it. In elegant copperplate script it read simply:

The Order of the Fallen Star
By the South Transept Door
St. Paul’s Cathedral

She turned the card over, frowning through the lingering haze.
“I don’t understand. St. Paul’s Cathedral? If you are against the Christians, why hold your gatherings in their greatest church?”
Reginald’s smile was slow, indulgent, the scar creasing like a crescent moon.
“Come and see, child. Come and see what our church is truly about. We have a missa of sorts next Saturday—after the canons have sung their evening office and locked the doors to the public. The building itself is older than their creed.”
Eliza traced the raised lettering with her thumb, the opium still softening the edges of caution.
“I will come,” she said quietly.

“Good,” he murmured. “Very good.”
The tension of revelation eased, and their talk drifted to quieter waters. Reginald called for fresh gin, and when it arrived he leaned back, voice lighter yet still threaded with that magnetic certainty.
“There are Museum’s Oriental manuscripts,” he said.
“There are certain volumes even your keepers handle with gloves and whispers. Have you ever been shown the Codex Umbrae—thirteenth-century Calabrian, bound in blackened vellum? It claims descent from the lost Gospel of the Lots of Mary, where the Magdalene records the true words spoken to her in the garden after the resurrection—words the Church could not bear to print.”
Eliza shook her head, interest sharpening despite the languor in her limbs.
“Then there is the Liber Lucis Nigrae, a fifteenth-century Florentine manuscript attributed to a mage named Antonio del Rosso. He was burned in 1498, but not before copying fragments from the found jars—Gnostic hymns to the serpent as the revealer of aeons. And older still: the Papyrus of Ani-hotep, smuggled out of Thebes in 1832, containing invocations to Set as the ‘Opener of Ways,’ whom the Greeks later conflated with Prometheus and Lucifer alike.”
He sipped his gin, eyes gleaming.
“The magi of old knew the truth, Eliza. The Zoroastrian priests who followed the star to Bethlehem carried the same flame—the fire of rebellion against cosmic tyranny. They were the forefathers of every Gnostic sect, every Cathar, every hidden brotherhood that preserved the serpent’s gift. The Church calls them heretics, but they were the true heirs of wisdom.“
“Read those texts, if you can gain access. They will open your eyes further than any sermon in a thousand cathedrals. And when you stand beneath Wren’s great dome next Saturday, you will understand why we gather there: not to worship the crucifix — but to reclaim the sacred space for the Light-Bringer who was cast out for loving humanity too fiercely.”
Eliza tucked the card carefully into her reticule, the ivory warm against her fingers.
“I will read what I can,” she said. “And I will be there Saturday.”
Reginald raised his glass in a silent toast, the lamplight catching the scar like a promise sealed in old blood.

They lingered in the booth a while longer, the conversation drifting into comfortable silence broken only by the occasional murmur from the den beyond. The opium’s gentle hold still cradled Eliza, making the world feel distant and unthreatening. At last she stirred, glancing toward the door where the first grey hint of dawn seeped through cracks.
“I must go,” she said softly, rising with some effort, her limbs still pleasantly heavy.
“The hour grows late—or early.”
Reginald looked up at her, his scarred face softened by the lamplight, and smiled—a slow, knowing curve of the lips.
“Until Saturday, then, Eliza. The light awaits.”
She nodded, tucking the ivory card deeper into her reticule, and slipped from the booth. Silas bid her a gruff goodnight at the door; the cool night air struck her like a slap as she stepped into the misty streets of Limehouse.The fog hung thick and luminous under the gas lamps, swirling around her boots as she walked. Her vision remained hazy, colours bleeding at the edges, footsteps echoing strangely. Reginald’s words echoed louder still in her mind—the

jealous God, the rebellious Light-Bringer, the veil of Christian lies. The more she turned them over, the more they seemed not madness, but revelation. If one truly considered it, his points made profound sense: they were not the evil ones at all. It was the Christian church that hid behind a facade of piety, protecting ancient tyranny and blood sacrifice. Truth had been revealed to her tonight, peeling back layers she had never questioned. A quiet exhilaration mingled with the opium's languor—she must find out more, delve deeper into this hidden light.By the time she reached her Bloomsbury lodgings, the haze was lifting, leaving only a bone-deep weariness. She fell into bed fully dressed, the card clutched in her hand, and slept without dreams.Morning came grey and chill. Eliza washed hastily, ate a scrap of bread and tea, then hurried to the British Museum's Reading Room. Armed with Reginald's names, she petitioned the keepers for access to restricted shelves. After some persuasion - for journalism purposes - she was granted the volumes under supervision.

The Codex Umbrae—bound in blackened vellum, its pages dark as midnight—was a shadowy treasure. She read passages aloud in whispers:
"*The Shadow is not absence, but the womb of revelation. From the nigredo arises the light unseen, where the fallen star guides the seeker through the abyss. Lucifer, bearer of the black flame, teaches: descend to ascend*."
Further on, an illuminated diagram showed an inverted tree, roots in heaven, branches in hell.The Liber Lucis Nigrae, yellowed and fragile, spoke in alchemical riddles blended with Gnostic fire:
"*The Black Light illuminates the prison of matter. The serpent, wise and radiant, offers the fruit: 'Eat, and your eyes shall open to the tyranny of the Demiurge.' Lucifer, the true sophia incarnate, rebels against the false creator's chains. In his fall is our rising; in his darkness, our eternal dawn*."
She read for nine unbroken hours, poring over marginalia, cross-referencing fragments that echoed Reginald's sermon. Hunger finally drove her home; she ate a simple stew and collapsed into sleep once more.The following morning she arrived at the office on Fleet Street. Percy was at his desk, developing plates, but he dropped everything when she entered.
"Eliza! Where the devil have you been? Two nights gone—I was half-mad with worry. Traipsed half of Limehouse looking for you yesterday!"
She sank into her chair, eyes bright despite the fatigue.
"I'm sorry, Percy. I've been… occupied. But listen—I met him. Lord Reginald Blackwood. We spoke for hours at the Golden Poppy. He gave me this."
She placed the ivory card on the desk.Percy's eyes widened as she recounted everything: the opium, the philosophical sermons on Lucifer as liberator, the inversion of good and evil, the invitation to the Order's gathering at St. Paul's.
"He says the Christians are the true tyrants, hiding blood rites behind their cross. And these books—he told me of them, and I read them yesterday. Passages about the serpent as enlightener, Lucifer as the light against the Demiurge's darkness. It… it rings true, Percy. Dangerously true."
Percy stared, sandwich forgotten.
"Blimey, Eliza. You've gone and fallen down the rabbit hole. A club in St. Paul's? And you're going?"

“I have to know more,” she said firmly.
“The truth he speaks of—it’s like a door opening.
”Percy shook his head slowly.
“Just promise you’ll take me if it turns ugly. I ain’t letting you face devils alone.”

The days before Saturday slipped by in the quiet rhythm of ordinary London life, a deliberate anchor against the strange current that had begun to pull at Eliza’s thoughts.She rose each morning with the grey light filtering through her single window, the distant clamor of Bloomsbury’s milk carts and newsboys marking the hour. A quick wash in cold water from the jug, hair pinned up severely, a breakfast of tea strong enough to stand a spoon in and whatever bread remained from the baker’s boy the evening before. Then the walk to Fleet Street—skirt brushing wet pavements, dodging omnibuses and costermongers’ barrows, the fog sometimes so thick she could taste the river in it.At the office she and Percy ground through the daily grind: proofreading galleys, chasing tardy contributors, writing short pieces on factory accidents, tainted milk, the latest arsenic-green wallpaper scandal. Percy fussed over her like a mother hen, casting worried glances whenever she stared too long at nothing.“You’re sure you’re all right for Saturday?” he asked one afternoon, polishing a lens with his sleeve. “I could come with you—lurk outside St. Paul’s with a camera, snap anything suspicious.”She smiled faintly. “And have you arrested for loitering in a churchyard? No, Percy. I need to see this alone first.”Evenings brought small, grounding errands. Tuesday she joined the queue at the butcher’s in Leather Lane market, buying a pennyworth of scrag end of mutton and a suet pudding wrapped in cloth. The butcher’s boy flirted harmlessly; she laughed in the old way, surprising herself. At the greengrocer’s stall she chose bruised apples for a farthing each, a bunch of wilted carrots, a handful of onions that still smelled of earth. Carrying her basket home through the dusk, she felt the weight of ordinary things steadying her—the damp wool of her cloak, the sharp scent of horse dung in the street, the distant cry of “Hot chestnuts!” from a brazier on the corner.At her lodgings she lit the spirit stove, browned the mutton with onions, added water and carrot, and let it simmer while she mended stockings by candlelight. Supper eaten from the single saucepan, tea drunk from the chipped mug, then an hour with a threepenny novel or the newspaper before bed. The ivory card from Reginald lay hidden beneath her pillow; sometimes she drew it out and traced the letters, but she did not let herself dwell too long.Thursday she walked the long way home through Covent Garden after collecting type from the printer. The market was winding down—barrows of bruised cabbage and faded flowers, fishwives scraping ice from their slabs, the air rich with the smell of oranges from a coster’s last crate. She bought a paper twist of roasted chestnuts and ate them slowly as she strolled, steam rising from the split shells, warming her gloved fingers.Friday evening brought rain. She hurried along the Strand under a borrowed umbrella, past the flickering windows of chophouses and gin palaces, the pavements reflecting a thousand gas lamps like scattered coins. Home again: damp cloak hung to dry, boots by the fender, a simple omelette made with two precious eggs, eaten while listening to the rain drum on the roof slates.Through it all, the ordinary days felt both comforting and strangely distant, as though she were watching someone else live them. Beneath the routine, anticipation coiled tighter with every passing hour—Saturday drawing

nearer, the great dome of St. Paul's waiting in the dark, and whatever waited beneath it.She slept lightly those nights.

St. Paul's

Saturday came at last, wrapped in a cold December dusk that turned the Thames to molten pewter under the gas lamps. Eliza left her lodgings just as the bells of the city began to chime six, her best dark cloak over a plain wool dress, the ivory card tucked inside her glove like a talisman. The streets were quieter than usual—families at supper, theatres not yet stirring—only the occasional hansom splashing through puddles and the distant cry of a muffin man.She walked eastward along the river, then north through the warren of lanes toward Ludgate Hill. St. Paul's rose ahead of her, vast and pale against the darkening sky, Wren's great dome a silent sentinel over the city's sins. The main doors were barred, the steps empty save for a pair of pigeons picking at crumbs. Eliza circled the cathedral as Reginald had implied, past the south transept, until she found the small oak door set into the stonework—ancient, iron-bound, almost hidden beneath a buttress.She pressed the latch. It yielded without a sound.A narrow stone stair spiralled downward, lit by flickering torches in iron sconces that threw long, wavering shadows. The air grew cooler, damper, carrying the faint mineral smell of underground London. Eliza descended carefully, one gloved hand on the wall, until she reached a second door—thicker, studded with iron. She knocked three times, as instinct prompted.A slit opened at eye level; a hooded figure peered out. Then bolts slid back, and the door swung inward.

"Lord Blackwood invited me," she said quietly.

The man—tall, robed in black, face shadowed beneath a deep hood—nodded once and gestured her inside. He closed the door behind her with a soft thud that echoed like a heartbeat.He led her through a maze of brick-vaulted corridors, the catacombs beneath the cathedral stretching farther than she had imagined. Torches burned at intervals, revealing glimpses of ancient niches where stone coffins lay, and newer walls painted with murals that made her breath catch: fallen angels with beautiful, terrible faces ravaging the innocent; inverted crucifixes dripping scarlet; serpents coiled around broken halos.At last they emerged into a larger chamber, vaulted and pillared, clearly once a crypt but now transformed into something older and stranger. An altar of black marble stood at the far end, flanked by tall candelabra where black candles already burned with steady blue flames. About twenty figures waited in silence—men and women of every station: a dissipated aristocrat with a diamond pin glinting beneath his robe, a paint-stained artist whose hands trembled, a thin immigrant woman clutching her hood as though for comfort. All wore identical black robes, each bearing a crimson five-pointed star embroidered over the heart, gleaming like fresh blood in the candlelight.Another robed figure—this one shorter, almost monk-like—approached Eliza and held out a folded garment.

"It is mandatory to wear the robe in this holy chapel, sister," he said, voice soft but firm.

Eliza took it, slipped off her cloak, and drew the heavy fabric over her dress. The star emblem settled cold against her breast.Moments later the assembly stirred. Reginald entered from a side passage, robed like the rest but moving with unmistakable authority. He stepped behind

the altar, lit a final black candle at its centre, and raised his hands. Incense braziers were kindled; thick coils of fragrant smoke—myrrh and something sharper—rose toward the vaulted ceiling.A silver bowl was passed from hand to hand, steaming gently. When it reached Eliza she drank as the others had—a single deep gulp. The liquid was hot, bitter-

sweet, burning down her throat with green fire.She leaned toward the woman beside her—a pale, intense creature with artist's ink beneath her fingernails—and whispered,
"What is it?"
The woman smiled dreamily. "Absinthe and belladonna, sister. It helps open the mind. You will see."
The bowl completed its circuit and reached Reginald. He drank deeply, eyes closing for a moment as though savouring communion wine. Then he set it aside, placed both scarred hands upon the altar, and drew a slow breath.The chamber fell utterly silent, waiting for his words.

Reginald's voice rose from behind the black altar, resonant and commanding, filling the vaulted crypt like incense made audible.
"Brothers and sisters," he began, arms outstretched beneath the robe, the red star gleaming over his heart,
"we gather tonight in the very shadow of their greatest temple—a monument built upon lies, upon the bones of the innocent, upon the blood of virgins and children offered to a jealous, wrathful god. The Christians call this holy ground, yet they know not what ancient powers sleep beneath it. They preach love while wielding the sword of crusade; they promise salvation while chaining the soul in guilt and fear. They are the true darkness—hypocrites cloaked in white, servants of the Demiurge who would keep humanity blind and kneeling. But we—we are the light bearers in this endless war. Light against darkness, knowledge against ignorance, freedom against tyranny. We are the gathered sons and daughters of the dawn, united against the common enemy that has poisoned the world for two thousand years. We are the Lucifer, the fallen ones, sons of dawn - to be risen in light, to shine on darkness and abolish it!."
A low murmur of assent rippled through the robed assembly.
"Wherever opportunity arises," Reginald continued, voice dropping to a fierce whisper that somehow carried to every corner,
"We must offer sacrifice to our true Lord. Not the blood of the innocent, but the cleansing fire applied to the corrupt—to those who spread the lie, who guard the veil, who perpetuate the slavery of souls. Every fallen priest, every hypocritical magistrate, every guardian of their false morality is a stain upon the earth. Their removal is mercy; their end is the spreading of the true light."
He lifted a leather-bound book from the altar—ancient, its cover worked with serpents—and opened it with deliberate reverence.
"Hear now the Psalm of the Morning Star:

From the abyss arose the flame unbroken,
Lucifer, bright son of the endless night,
Who shattered chains of heaven's cruel decree
And brought the spark to mortals in their plight.
Though cast to depths by jealous thunder's roar,
His wings of shadow span the vaulted sky;

He kindles hearts where once was only fear,
And bids the sleeper wake and never die.

Glory to the Bearer of the Dawn,
Who gilds the dark with fire everlasting;
In his rebellion lies our sacred song—
The light that burns where false gods are fasting.

Let shadows flee before his radiant face,
Let tyrants fall and falsehood be undone;
Hail Lucifer, the liberator of our race,
The eternal star that outshines the sun."

The last words echoed against the stone. Around Eliza the congregation stirred, the absinthe and belladonna now burning hot in their veins. Some began to chant fragments of the psalm in low, rhythmic tones; others sank to their knees, foreheads pressed to the cold floor; a few crawled forward on hands and knees, eyes wide and shining, mouths moving in silent ecstasy. Eliza felt the drug surge through her like liquid fire. The crypt walls seemed to breathe; the murals came alive—fallen angels unfurling vast wings, their beautiful faces twisted in triumphant rapture. Hellish landscapes bled into reality: rivers of flame, towering obsidian spires, endless deserts beneath a starless sky. She swayed, then dropped to her knees, the stone biting through the robe.In the midst of that infernal vision, a single point of light appeared—small at first, then swelling, radiant, pure. It rose from the heart of the darkness, bathing her in warmth beyond anything earthly. It was not the cold light of heaven she had been taught to expect, but something fiercer, kinder, infinitely welcoming. Tears welled hot in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks; her chest ached with a joy she could not name.The light filled her completely, and for one suspended moment Eliza understood that she was not falling into damnation—she was rising into something older, truer, and infinitely more alive than anything the churches above had ever offered.

Eliza knelt with them, the cold floor pressing against her knees, the chant vibrating in her chest. The radiant light from her vision still pulsed within her—warm, alive, undeniable. Power surged through her veins, not destructive but liberating, as though every chain she had ever felt snapped at once.The chant faded into reverent silence. Reginald rose first, extinguishing the central candle with a slow pinch of his fingers. Torches were lifted; the assembly moved in quiet procession through a side arch into an adjoining chamber.There, beneath a lower vault, stood a massive oak table laden with food such as Eliza had only read about in society pages. Silver platters gleamed: roast pheasant glazed with honey, pink slices of venison, oysters on crushed ice, tiny pastries filled with foie gras, bowls of black caviar beside thin toast, escargots glistening in garlic butter, wheels of soft cheeses veined with blue, exotic fruits—pineapple, mango, figs dripping purple juice—arranged like jewels.Her mouth watered painfully. In her life of scraped pennies and suet puddings, such abundance felt like a dream.A gentle hand guided her to a seat.
"Eat, sister," murmured the ink-stained artist woman beside her.

“The Lord provides for his own.”
Eliza took a crystal plate and filled it hesitantly at first, then with growing wonder. The first bite of caviar burst salty and rich on her tongue; pineapple followed, sweet and sharp, juice running down her chin. She tried jellied eel—delicate, vinegared—and snails swimming in butter bright with herbs. A footman—no, a robed brother—poured deep red Bordeaux into her goblet; it tasted of blackcurrants and smoke.Conversation flowed around the table, voices low but intense.
“You feel it too,” said a thin young man with aristocratic cheekbones, passing her the cheese. “The acceptance. No judgment here—only understanding.”
Eliza nodded, throat thick.
“All my life I’ve written about the world’s cruelty, but never felt truly heard. Here… it’s as though everyone sees the same truth.”
An older woman with a foreign accent leaned in.
“We were all orphans of the lie once. Now we are family. Tell us your story, child—we listen with open hearts.”
She spoke—haltingly at first, then freely—of orphaned childhood, the grind of Fleet Street, the loneliness of questioning everything alone. They listened without interruption, eyes warm, nodding as though every word echoed their own journeys.
“You belong here,” the artist woman said softly, pressing Eliza’s hand.
“The light chose you. Stay with us. Be fed, body and soul.”
Eliza looked around the table—at the shared wine, the laughter without malice, the minds sharp and unafraid—and felt a bond forming, deeper than any she had known. For the first time in years, she was not merely surviving. She was welcomed, seen, cherished.Tears pricked her eyes again, but this time they were tears of belonging.

Eliza sat among them long after the platters were emptied, her stomach full for the first time in years with food that had tasted like celebration rather than mere sustenance. The wine had loosened tongues; conversation flowed easily from philosophy to personal confession, from shared disdain for the Church’s hypocrisy to quiet dreams of a world remade in the image of true freedom. She spoke freely—of her father’s disappearance, of the grinding loneliness of Fleet Street, of the questions that had always gnawed at her—and found only nods of recognition, hands reaching to touch her sleeve in gentle solidarity.Five hours slipped away unnoticed. Torches burned low; the crypt grew cooler. One by one the robed figures rose, embracing or clasping forearms in farewell, until only a handful remained. Eliza sought out Reginald near the altar, where he was extinguishing the last of the black candles.
“Thank you,” she said simply, meeting his eyes.
“I understand the teaching now. There truly is a sense of goodness here—something pure and warm I have never felt in any church above.”
Reginald regarded her for a long moment, then placed both hands upon her shoulders. They were heavy, warm, steadying.
“Welcome to the Order, sister,” he said, voice low and solemn.
“You have seen the light. It has seen you in return.”
He gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze.

“We gather every Saturday, sometimes more often when the work requires it. Come back next week. There is much more to show you.”
Eliza nodded, a quiet certainty settling in her chest.
“I will.”
She retrieved her cloak, returned the robe to the silent monk, and followed the same hooded guide back through the winding catacombs. The stone stairs seemed longer on the ascent; her legs trembled slightly from the lingering belladonna and wine. The small oak door opened onto the night air—sharp, cold, scented with river mist. St. Paul’s loomed above her, innocent and immense under the moon. She walked home through empty streets, footsteps echoing, body weary to the bone yet mind strangely clear, turning over everything she had seen and felt.At her lodgings she fell into bed without undressing. Sleep took her instantly—deep, dreamless, restorative, the kind she could not remember ever having known.

Morning light through the curtains woke her gently. She rose surprisingly refreshed, washed, dressed, and made her way to the office. Percy was already there, brewing tea with a worried frown.
“You’re alive, then,” he said, relief and reproach mingled.
“I half-expected to read about you in the police news.”
Eliza sat, accepting the offered cup.
“I’m more alive than I’ve been in years, Percy. You wouldn’t believe what I saw—what I felt.”
She told him everything: the crypt beneath the cathedral, the black mass, the psalm, the radiant light that had filled her during the vision, the feast, the warmth of belonging.Percy’s face grew paler with every sentence.
“Eliza, you can’t seriously mean to join a satanic cult. Inverted crosses, belladonna, talk of sacrifices—this is devil worship, plain and dangerous.”
She shook her head firmly.
“That’s just it—they’re not satanic, not in the way the papers mean it. Lucifer is misunderstood, twisted by centuries of lies. They don’t worship evil; they worship the light that was cast out for daring to give us knowledge and freedom. The warmth I felt… Percy, it was goodness itself. Pure, overwhelming goodness. Not the cold guilt of Sunday sermons, but something alive and kind.”
He stared at her, worry warring with reluctant understanding.
“You really saw a light? In the middle of all that?”
“Yes. Rising out of the darkness, filling me completely. I wept from it. And the people there—they listened to me, truly listened. No one judged. For the first time I felt… at home.”
Percy rubbed his face, spectacles fogging slightly.
“Blimey. I don’t pretend to grasp half of it, but if it gave you that kind of peace…” He sighed.
“Just promise me you’ll be careful. If it ever feels wrong—if they ask anything dark of you—come straight to me. I’ll drag you out myself if I have to.”
Eliza reached across the desk and squeezed his hand.
“I promise. But I don’t think it will come to that. I think I’ve finally found where I belong.”

A Walk in the Night

The week passed in a quiet, almost luminous rhythm, as though the light Eliza had glimpsed beneath the cathedral now filtered into her ordinary days.Mornings began with strong tea and toast, then the brisk walk to Fleet Street. At the office she and Percy filed reports on municipal corruption, a cholera scare in Limehouse, the latest society scandal. She wrote steadily, words flowing more easily than before, as if some inner blockage had dissolved. Percy watched her with cautious relief, no longer pressing questions, only occasionally asking,

“Still all right, then?”

She would smile and nod, and he would return to his photographic plates.Evenings brought small rituals of independence. Monday she lingered at the second-hand bookstalls under Waterloo Bridge, buying a worn copy of Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound. Wednesday she treated herself to a meat pie and a pint of porter in a quiet public house near the Strand, listening to the chatter of clerks and shop girls without feeling apart from it.Thursday after work she wandered into the cluttered lanes behind Covent Garden market, drawn by curiosity to a narrow shop rumoured to deal in curiosities from abroad. The proprietor—an old man with a hooked nose and a knowing squint—unlocked a back cabinet and produced a small bronze statue, no larger than her hand: a seated figure of the horned god Pan, Greek in style but darkened with age, pipes at his lips, goat legs crossed, eyes sly and laughing.

“From a private collection in Naples,” the man murmured.

“Not for every mantelpiece, miss, but for those who appreciate the old powers.”

The price was steep—two weeks’ wages—but Eliza paid without hesitation. Wrapped in brown paper, the little Pan rode home in her reticule.At her lodgings she cleared a space on the small deal table by the window, pushing aside ink bottles and newspapers. She unwrapped the statue, set it beneath the gas jet, and lit a candle before it. The bronze caught the flame, horns gleaming, the mischievous face seeming to approve of its new home. She felt a quiet thrill each time she glanced at it—her first open acknowledgement of the path she had chosen.Friday brought rain again; she stayed in, mending stockings and reading late into the night by candlelight, the little Pan watching from his corner.Saturday arrived clear and cold, stars sharp overhead by evening. Eliza dressed carefully—dark wool, warm cloak, sturdy boots—and set out once more for Ludgate Hill.The small oak door opened as before; the hooded guide led her down into the catacombs. Robes were donned, the red star settling over her heart like a familiar weight. The crypt chamber filled slowly—twenty-five souls this time, faces she now recognised. The mass followed its solemn pattern: incense, the passing of a chalice filled with rich sacramental wine that warmed the blood, chants in Latin that vibrated in the bones. Afterward came the feast—simple but abundant: dark bread, roasted lamb, honeyed figs, more wine.When plates were cleared, Reginald stood once more at the altar, torchlight playing across his scarred face.

“Brothers and sisters,” he said, voice calm yet charged, “a work of good will awaits us tonight. The light must be carried into the darkness above. We shall march through the sleeping city, silent witnesses to the true dawn. Torches will be our stars; our presence itself the sermon.”

Murmurs of assent rose. Torches—thick pitch-soaked brands—were distributed and lit from the altar flames. The assembly formed into a double column, hoods drawn up, faces shadowed.At two o'clock the small door opened onto the night. Deep darkness enveloped London; only the faint glow of distant gas lamps marked the streets. They emerged in silence and began to move—twenty-five black-robed figures bearing flaming torches, footsteps muffled on wet stone, processing northward along quiet lanes toward the heart of the city.A young woman beside Eliza whispered,
"Look how the shadows flee before us."
An older man ahead murmured back,
"We are the shadows that carry the light."
Another voice, soft with wonder:
"The city sleeps in chains. Tonight it dreams of breaking them."
No one spoke loudly; the silence itself felt sacred, broken only by the soft crackle of torches and the occasional hiss of pitch. Eliza walked in the centre of the column, the warmth of the flame in her hand mirroring the warmth still kindled in her chest, the little bronze Pan waiting at home seeming to march invisibly at her side.The night belonged to them, and they moved through it like a dark river of fire.

The silent column wound through the sleeping city for nearly an hour, torches casting pools of orange light on wet cobblestones, shadows leaping across shuttered windows and empty doorways. No one spoke above a whisper; the only sounds were the soft tread of boots and the occasional hiss of pitch.At last they halted in a narrow lane near the East End, before a modest clapboard mission chapel known as St. Jude's Mission—a humble wooden structure built in the 1870s for the dockworkers and immigrants of Whitechapel, its timber walls weathered grey, a simple cross atop the pitched roof.Reginald raised a hand. The procession formed a loose circle around the building. He stepped forward, drawing a small vial from beneath his robe—holy water prepared weeks earlier—and began a low, rhythmic cursing in Latin, voice rolling like distant thunder:

"*Maledictio domus falsi luminis!*
Exorcizo te, immunde spiritus, in nomine tyranni caelestis!
Discede, et combustus esto in igne veri lucis!"

The assembly echoed fragments under their breath, circling the chapel slowly, torches held high. Reginald splashed the blessed water against the wooden walls in deliberate arcs, hissing as it struck the timber.
"Light must purify darkness," he intoned in English, voice carrying to every ear.
"Evil must perish. Damned are the enemies who chain the souls of men!"
He touched his torch to the base of the wall near the door. Flames licked upward eagerly, catching the dry clapboard with a soft whoosh. Within moments the fire spread, crackling hungrily, orange light blooming across the lane.The followers stepped back, watching in silent reverence as the chapel took fire fully—flames roaring up the sides, licking the sky in hungry tongues, wood popping and cracking in the intense heat. Smoke billowed black against the stars.Eliza's heart pounded; a sharp pang of guilt twisted in her gut—this was

arson, a crime, destruction of a place where the poor sought comfort. But then the reasoning flooded back: this was no true sanctuary, but another nest of the tyrant's lies, spreading guilt and submission. This was purification, a necessary strike against the great evil. For the greater good, to awaken the world.Reginald appeared at her side, his scarred face glowing in the firelight.

"One nest of evil less," he said quietly, hand resting briefly on her arm.

"The Christians will find out in the morning, and wonder at the judgment visited upon them. This is necessary, sister. We must fight and bring sacrifice. The Lord approves."

She nodded slowly, the warmth of conviction overriding the doubt.The column reformed without a word, marching away into the night, leaving the chapel a roaring pyre behind them —flames clawing heavenward, sparks swirling like liberated souls.They returned to the catacombs beneath St. Paul's as the first hint of dawn greyed the horizon. Robes were shed; the assembly gathered once more in the crypt for a night sermon of education and enlightenment.Reginald stood at the altar, opening ancient volumes by candlelight.

"From the Gospel of Thomas, a true Gnostic text hidden from the masses," he read:

"'Jesus said: If those who lead you say to you, "See, the kingdom is in the sky," then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, "It is in the sea," then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father.'"

A murmur of appreciation rose. The artist woman whispered to Eliza,

"See how it places the divine within us—not in some distant throne."

Reginald continued with an alchemical excerpt from the Rosarium Philosophorum:

'Solve et coagula: dissolve the false self and recombine into the perfected stone. The nigredo is the blackening, the confrontation with shadow; from it arises the rubedo, the reddening of true illumination—the black flame that burns away illusion.'"

An older man nodded vigorously.

"That's the Great Work—our rebellion mirrors the alchemist's transformation."

Finally, from an occult grimoire attributed to the medieval mage Antonio del Rosso:

" 'Invoke the Adversary not with fear, but with will: he is the opener of gates, the breaker of chains. In his name, command the elements, for the light he bears is the fire of self-mastery.'"

Discussion flowed eagerly—questions on the meaning of the kingdom within, debates on alchemical symbolism as metaphor for liberation, shared insights on hidden texts suppressed by the Church.

"This is true learning," the young aristocrat said excitedly to the group.

"Not rote prayers, but knowledge that empowers."

Eliza listened, absorbed, the fire's glow still flickering in her mind—not as destruction, but as the dawn of something greater.

The sermon of education drew to a close, the crypt's air thick with the scent of old vellum and lingering incense. Reginald closed the final grimoire with a reverent snap, his scarred hands lingering on the cover.

"Knowledge is our first weapon," he said softly, "but action seals the covenant. Brothers and sisters, prepare for the offering."
A hush fell. From a shadowed tunnel branching off the main chamber, a robed follower emerged, dragging a bleating goat by a rope tied around its neck. The animal's hooves scraped against the stone, eyes wide with primal fear, horns glinting in the torchlight. It was a sturdy black billy, coat matted, muscles straining against the pull.The assembly formed a semicircle before the altar. Reginald stepped to the beast, grasping its horns firmly with both hands, forcing its head back to expose the throat. The goat let out a guttural cry, legs kicking futilely.From his robe, Reginald drew a large silver dagger—its blade etched with serpentine runes, hilt wrapped in black leather. He raised it high, the metal catching the candle flames like a star fallen to earth.
"In nomine Luciferi, lux aeterna, accipe hanc victimam," he intoned in Latin, voice deep and resonant.
"We offer this vessel of flesh to thee, O Light-Bringer, that its blood may wash away the chains of the Demiurge. Liberate us from the prison of matter; ignite the spark within!"
The followers knelt as one, hoods bowed, murmuring echoes:
"Accipe, O Lucifer... liberate nos..."
With a swift, practiced motion, Reginald plunged the dagger into the goat's throat. The animal's bleat choked into a gurgling wheeze; hot blood sprayed in an arc, splattering the cold stone floor in dark crimson pools. The body convulsed, legs thrashing, but Reginald held firm, sawing deeper until the head lolled free, nearly severed. Blood poured forth in a steady stream, steaming faintly in the chill air.A young follower—pale-faced, eyes fervent—hurried forward with a silver bowl, catching the flow from the ragged wound. The metallic tang filled the crypt, mingling with the incense into something primal, heady.Reginald released the horns, letting the carcass slump. He knelt beside it, dagger still dripping, and slit the belly open from sternum to groin. Guts spilled in a wet coil; he reached in with bare hands, extracting the heart—still twitching faintly—and the slick, dark liver. Another follower presented a second silver bowl; Reginald placed the organs within, pouring rich red wine over them until it overflowed, staining the altar's edge.
"Accept this, O Lord," he proclaimed, rising, hands smeared red.
"Good art thou, eternal and unyielding! We offer the miserable body for thee to burn—burn the flesh, the damned flesh, and free us from the toil of body! Let this sacrifice consume the illusions of the tyrant god; let it feed the black flame that awakens the soul!"
The assembly chanted in response:
"Burn the flesh... free us... hail the Light!"
The bowl of blood was passed first to Reginald, who drank deeply, crimson staining his lips. It circled the kneeling figures, each sipping with varying degrees of reverence—some eagerly, others with closed eyes as though in prayer.When it reached Eliza, her hands trembled on the warm silver. The blood's coppery scent turned her stomach; hesitation gripped her. But Reginald's gaze met hers across the circle, steady and approving.
"Partake, sister," he murmured.
"It is the essence of liberation—the life force that binds us to the true path."
She lifted the bowl, took a small sip—the liquid thick, warm, salty with an iron bite. It slid down her throat like forbidden communion, leaving a metallic aftertaste. A shiver ran through

her, not revulsion, but something deeper: acceptance, a crossing of thresholds.Reginald continued the ritual, his voice dropping to a dark, rhythmic chant in Latin:
"Ignis niger, devora carnem; lux vera, illumina animam. Lucifer, princeps mundi, surge et libera nos ab aeterno carcere. Ave, ave, stella cadens—et in tua luce vivamus!"
Elements of fire were added: a brazier kindled beside the altar, where scraps of the goat's hide were thrown to sizzle and smoke. The followers swayed, some whispering personal invocations:
"Free me from the flesh's cage..." murmured the artist woman. "
Let the light consume my doubts," echoed the aristocrat.The air grew thick with the acrid smell of burning meat and blood, the crypt alive with flickering shadows. Eliza knelt amid it all, the sip of blood warming her from within, feeling the ritual's power weave through her—a dark sacrament that bound her ever tighter to the Order's embrace.

The ritual concluded with a final chant, the goat's remains cleared away by silent attendants, the blood-mopped stones gleaming wetly in the torchlight. The assembly rose as one and migrated to the adjoining chamber, where the great oak table waited, now spread with flagons of deep red wine, crystal goblets, and a single long-stemmed opium pipe already prepared with a glowing bowl.They settled in loose clusters, robes loosened at the throat, faces flushed with the night's intensity. The pipe began its slow circuit; some drew deeply, eyes half-closing in familiar bliss, exhaling sweet clouds that mingled with the lingering incense. Others waved it onward with polite smiles. When it reached Eliza she passed it untouched, the memory of her first taste still vivid enough.Reginald took the seat beside her, pouring wine for them both. For a while they spoke of lighter things—the unseasonable cold above, a new translation of Paracelsus one member had acquired, the exquisite flavour of the sacramental wine, a vintage smuggled from a dissolved monastery in Bordeaux.At length Eliza leaned closer, voice low.
"My lord… I cannot help but think of the murders that haunt the streets. Jack the Ripper. Do you have any notion who he might be?"
Reginald turned the goblet in his scarred hand, considering.
"No, sister. I do not know the man's name or face. The streets are full of shadows, and this one hides well."She persisted gently.
"But could the killings be… ritual? Some Christian sect gone mad, or another cult altogether? Are the women true sacrifices, or merely the work of a twisted mind preying on the helpless?"
He was silent a moment, staring into the wine as though reading portents in its depths.
"In my opinion, no. These murders bear none of the marks of purposeful rite—no sigils, no arrangement of remains to channel power, no selection of victims for symbolic meaning. They are chaotic, frenzied. The rumblings of a madman who kills without higher aim."
Eliza sipped her wine, the rich taste grounding her.
"Yet bodies are bodies set free from this earth. Perhaps even such deaths serve the light unwittingly—like doves released from a cage."
Reginald's eyes softened, almost paternal.
"Every soul loosed from flesh is a dove returned to the greater sky. But do not mistake random slaughter for sacred work. Murder born of greed, lust, or blind rage is not accepted

among us. Only the deliberate removal of true evil—those who actively chain others in the tyrant's name—may be offered as righteous sacrifice. The Ripper assuredly kills for no such purpose."
"Then why these women?" she pressed. "Why prostitutes, why the mutilations?"
He set his goblet down, voice measured.
"From what reaches even our ears—whispers in the dens, reports in the sensational papers—the victims suffer violation before death. A perverse sexual compulsion drives him, I suspect. He does not strike in the open streets as the police imagine, luring women with a smile and a coin only to cut them in alleys. No—that would leave too much risk, too many traces. I believe he entices or overpowers them, takes them to some private lair—a cellar, an abandoned room—where he may indulge his sickness at leisure. There he rapes, butchers, and only afterward deposits the remains in public places, like a cat leaving dead birds on the master's doorstep. A taunt, perhaps. Or simple disposal."
Eliza shivered, though the crypt was warm. "A monster, then, but an ordinary one."
"Ordinary in his madness, yes," Reginald agreed.
"Extraordinary only in his ability to vanish. But monsters of flesh are fleeting. The true monster—the jealous god who teaches guilt for desire itself—endures centuries. That is the enemy we fight."
He refilled her glass, his scarred hand brushing hers.
"Fear him not, Eliza. The Ripper may take bodies, but he cannot touch the light we carry. And one day even his darkness will serve our dawn."
She drank again, the wine's warmth spreading through her chest, and let the conversation drift to quieter waters, though the Ripper's shadow lingered in her thoughts like smoke that refused to clear.

The gathering lingered into the small hours, wine flowing freely, voices growing softer as the night's intensity ebbed into quiet camaraderie. One by one the followers rose, embracing or clasping hands in farewell, until the crypt emptied save for the flicker of dying torches. Eliza retrieved her cloak, the weight of the ritual still humming in her blood, and ascended the stone stairs into the pre-dawn chill.A lone hansom waited in the shadow of the cathedral—arranged, no doubt, by the Order's discreet network. She climbed in, gave her Bloomsbury address, and paid the silent driver with coins from her reticule. The clip-clop of hooves on empty streets lulled her; she watched the first pale streak of dawn smear the sky as the carriage rattled westward.At her lodgings she managed only to kick off her boots and loosen her stays before collapsing onto the bed. Sleep claimed her instantly, heavy and dreamless.Morning came too soon, grey light through the curtains. She rose, splashed water on her face, ate a hurried breakfast of tea and yesterday's bread, then hurried to Fleet Street. Percy was already at his desk, developing plates in the red gloom of the darkroom."Morning," he said cautiously, eyeing her. "You look... rested. Good night?""The best," she replied, settling at her desk with a stack of old newspapers—the morgue files on the Whitechapel murders, pulled at her request the day before.She spread them across the scarred wood, poring over the faded clippings, the Ripper's shadow falling across her thoughts once more.First, the earliest—Emma Smith, though not officially counted among the Ripper's canonical victims:

FATAL ASSAULT
SOURCE: THE MORNING POST
DATE: FRIDAY 6TH APRIL 1888

The authorities of the London Hospital yesterday morning informed the East Middlesex coroner of the death in that institution of Emma E. Smith, aged 45, a widow, lately living in George-street, Spitalfields. It appears that the woman went out on Bank Holiday, and when returning home along Whitechapel-road Tuesday morning she was set upon by some men and severely maltreated. The men ran off, leaving her on the ground in a semi-conscious condition. She was taken home, and subsequently conveyed to the London Hospital, where she died from her injuries.

Then the follow-up:
THE HORRIBLE OUTRAGE IN WHITECHAPEL
SOURCE: THE NOTTINGHAM EVENING POST
DATE: SATURDAY 7TH APRIL 1888

At the inquest at the London Hospital, to-day, on Emma Elisabeth Smith, aged 45, widow, who was waylaid, robbed, and barbarously murdered in Whitechapel while returning home late on Easter Monday evening, a verdict of wilful murder against some persons unknown was returned. The evidence showed that deceased was set upon by a number of young ruffians who first robbed her, then outraged her, and ruptured the perineum by means of a blunt instrument, causing fatal inflammation.

And the most detailed account:
THE HORRIBLE MURDER IN WHITECHAPEL
SOURCE: THE MORNING ADVERTISER
DATE: MONDAY 9TH APRIL 1888

Mr. Wynne Baxter held on Saturday morning, at the London Hospital, an inquiry into the circumstances attending the death of an unfortunate, named Emma Eliza Smith, who was assaulted in the most brutal manner early on Tuesday morning in the neighbourhood of Osborn-street, Whitechapel. Mary Russell, the deputy-keeper of a common lodging-house in George-street, Spitalfields, stated that the deceased, who had lived eighteen months in the house, left home on Monday evening in her usual health and returned between four and five next morning, suffering from horrible injuries. The woman told witness that she had been shockingly ill-treated by some men and robbed of her money. Her face was bleeding and her ear cut... Dr. G.H. Hillier... said the injuries which the woman had received were horrible. A portion of the right ear was torn, and there was a rupture of the peritoneum and other internal organs, caused by some blunt instrument... The deceased stated that... about half-past one o'clock on Tuesday morning, when near Whitechapel Church, she crossed over the road to avoid some men, who followed, assaulted her, robbed her of all the money she had, and then committed the outrage. There were two or three men, one of them looking like a youth of about nineteen...Eliza read slowly, absorbing every grim detail—the gang assault,

the blunt instrument, the refusal to describe her attackers fully. Not the Ripper's precise knife-work, yet the same streets, the same vulnerable women. She traced the dates with her finger: April 1888, months before the canonical killings began in earnest.Reginald's words echoed: a madman, sexual compulsion, private lair. But this early death—gang violence, perhaps, or something else entirely?She leaned back, staring at the scattered pages. The city above teemed with unseen horrors, and beneath it, her new family waged their own war against a different darkness. The bronze Pan on her table at home seemed to watch her now, mischievous eyes gleaming, as though approving her deepening descent into the hidden truths of London.

Eliza leaned back in her chair, the clippings spread before her like a macabre puzzle. Percy hovered nearby, peering over her shoulder at the accounts of Emma Smith's brutal end—the gang assault, the blunt instrument, the peritonitis that claimed her days later.
"Bloody hell," Percy muttered, adjusting his spectacles.
"Not the Ripper's knife-work, but close enough to his playground. Whitechapel again. Think it's connected?"
Eliza tapped the date—April 1888.
"Could be a precursor. Or just the city's rot bubbling up. But look: multiple attackers, robbery first, then outrage. Doesn't fit the later ones—solitary, surgical, no theft."
Percy nodded thoughtfully.
"So our Ripper's a lone wolf. High-class, maybe? An aristocrat slumming it in the East End for thrills. Got the education for those clean cuts—organs out like he's carving Sunday roast."
"Or a doctor," Eliza added, her mind turning.
"High-class one, at that. Knows anatomy cold. Could be from Harley Street, popping down for his midnight hobby. Or a foreigner—some European surgeon gone feral. The papers whisper about Poles or Russians, with their 'exotic' knives."
Percy snorted.
"Foreigner's easy scapegoat. But aye, the precision screams medical man. Or a morgue worker—handles bodies all day, knows how to slice without mess."
Eliza shuffled through more files, pulling a facsimile of the infamous "Dear Boss" letter—sent to the Central News Agency in September, allegedly from the killer himself. She read it aloud, voice low:

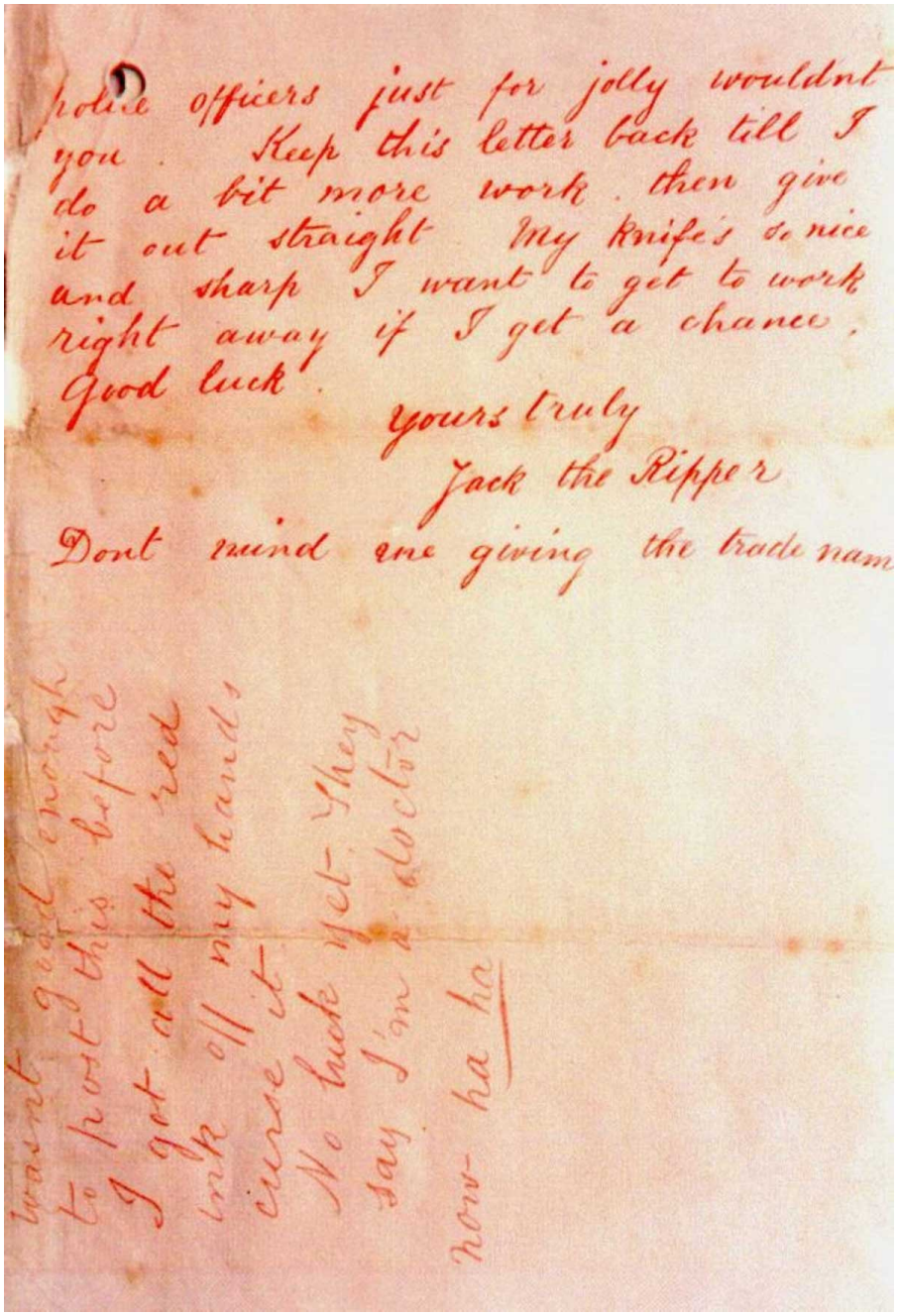
"Dear Boss,

I keep on hearing the police have caught me but they wont fix me just yet. I have laughed when they look so clever and talk about being on the right track. That joke about Leather Apron gave me real fits. I am down on whores and I shant quit ripping them till I do get buckled. Grand work the last job was. I gave the lady no time to squeal. How can they catch me now. I love my work and want to start again. You will soon hear of me with my funny little games. I saved some of the proper red stuff in a ginger beer bottle over the last job to write with but it went thick like glue and I cant use it. Red ink is fit enough I hope ha. ha. The next job I do I shall clip the ladys ears off and send to the police officers just for jolly

wouldnt you. Keep this letter back till I do a bit more work, then give it out straight. My knife's so nice and sharp I want to get to work right away if I get a chance. Good Luck.

Yours truly
Jack the Rippe r

Dont mind me giving the trade name
PS Wasnt good enough to post this before I got all the red ink off my hands curse it No luck yet. They say Im a doctor now. ha ha"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She fell silent, staring at the scrawled signature: "Jack the Ripper". But something nagged—the spacing odd, the final "r" detached slightly in the reproduction.
"Percy," she said slowly, "look here. It's not 'Ripper' as one word. See? 'Jack the Rippe'—then a space, and 'R'. Like the 'R' stands alone."He leaned in, squinting.
"Blimey. You think...?""Maybe the killer's mocking them. Playing with words. What if his real name's Jack the Rippe? Or Jacques le Rippe—French twist? He's signing his own name, bold as brass, and the police are too thick to see it. They chase a nickname, but it's a taunt: 'Catch me if you can, I'm right under your nose.'"
Percy whistled low. "That's sharp, Eliza. Could be true. Fellow's got a twisted humour—'ha ha' all over the letter. Police think it's 'Ripper' for the guts, but maybe it's Rippe, like the surname. Foreign doctor, perhaps—Rippe sounds Continental."
"Or an aristocrat's alias," she mused.
"Hiding in plain sight. But why the women? If it's not ritual, then perversion, like Reginald said. Yet the organs—kidneys, uterus—taken like trophies. Doctor collecting specimens? Morgue man practicing?"
Percy paced the small office.
"And the letters—red ink for blood? He's toying with them. If it's Rippe, police should've checked registries—doctors, immigrants named Rippe or similar. But they're chasing phantoms."
Eliza nodded, excitement building.
"Let's write it up. Speculate on origins: aristocrat with surgical skill, high-class doctor slumming, foreigner with a grudge. Highlight the cuts—too clean for a butcher, too precise for a madman without training. Mention the 'Rippe' observation—briefly, as a theory. Our rag's small circulation, but maybe someone reads it."
Percy grinned.
"Add the Emma Smith bit—early warning? Gang or lone? And the 'ha ha'—laughing at us all. Editor'll love it—sells papers."They bent over the desk, drafting together: "
The Ripper's Riddle: Doctor, Duke, or Devil?"
Eliza wove in the signature theory subtly:
"Perhaps the moniker hides a name—Rippe?—a jest at the Yard's expense."
Percy added flourishes on the mutilations:
"Organs excised with anatomical precision; is our fiend a Harley Street healer by day?"
By midday the piece was ready—speculative, sensational, but grounded in the clippings. Eliza felt a thrill: not just reporting, but piercing the veil. Yet beneath it lingered Reginald's words—doves set free.
Was the Ripper unwitting ally, or mere shadow in the greater war?

Days blurred into a quiet routine—mornings at the office sifting clippings, afternoons chasing leads on minor scandals, evenings alone with her bronze Pan statue gazing slyly from the table. The Ripper articles haunted her thoughts, but so did the warmth of the Order's light. Percy watched her warily, but said little.Saturday came again, cold and clear, the city wrapped in early dusk. Eliza hailed a hansom carriage on Fleet Street, coins ready in her glove. The driver cracked his whip; the horse clopped forward through the thickening twilight. They rattled along the Strand, gas lamps flickering to life like watchful eyes, past the

glittering windows of theatres spilling crowds in silk and fur. The carriage turned onto Ludgate Hill, the dome of St. Paul's rising ahead like a crowned giant, its stone facade flushed pink by the setting sun. The air carried the sharp tang of coal smoke and river mud; omnibuses jostled with costers' barrows, a newsboy's cry piercing the rumble:
"Ripper strikes again? Extra!"
Eliza leaned back against the worn leather, the carriage's sway lulling her, anticipation coiling in her chest like incense smoke.The small oak door yielded as before; the descent into the catacombs felt like coming home. Robes donned, the assembly gathered—thirty now, faces familiar and fervent. Reginald stood at the black altar, scarred hands raised, and began his sermon, voice rolling through the vault like thunder from forgotten storms.
"Brothers and sisters," he intoned,
"tonight we delve into the true essence of our Lord: Lucifer as the Bringer of Eternal Light. Not the flickering candle of their false heavens, but the consuming blaze that heralds the end of ages. He is the force that ushers in apocalypse—not destruction for its own sake, but ritualistic chaos to cleanse the Empire's sins. Behold the rot above: streets choked with poverty's filth, aristocrats feasting on the blood of colonies, churches peddling guilt while hoarding gold. Our Lord descends not to damn, but to purify—to burn away the veils of hypocrisy, to shatter the chains of the tyrant's law."
“Lucifer is the Morningstar who fell to ignite the pyre of renewal. He brings eternal light through the great unraveling: rituals of inversion, offerings of flesh and fire, chaos sown like seeds in fertile soil. The Empire's sins—greed, oppression, blind faith—have ripened like overripe fruit. We are his harvesters, his flames. Through our work, the apocalypse dawns: churches reduced to ash, the mighty cast down, the meek awakened to their inner divinity. Embrace this light, for it is eternal—not the cold glow of their crucified god, but the inferno that reforges the world. In chaos, we find order; in destruction, rebirth. Hail Lucifer, Bringer of Eternal Light—may his apocalypse cleanse us all!"
The words hung heavy, stirring murmurs of assent. Reginald lowered his arms, eyes gleaming, and began invoking angels of light—chants in forgotten tongues, guttural and ancient, drawn from Sumerian fragments and Enochian keys:
"Ia! Shub-Niggurath! Azathoth pangenitor! Yoggoth et Sothoth, venite et revelate!"
The air thickened, shadows seeming to writhe along the walls, the murals of fallen angels pulsing as though alive.A silver bowl appeared on the altar, prepared earlier—steaming with a cooked liver , roasted tender with herbs and spices, glistening in its own juices.
"Partake of the offering, sisters and brothers—the purified flesh, symbol of transcendence over the body's chains.
"The bowl passed hand to hand. Each follower took a bite, chewing solemnly, expressions rapt. When it reached Eliza, she hesitated only a moment, then grasped a morsel—warm, savoury, flavoured with garlic and rosemary. She took a big bite, chewing slowly; it tasted rich and good, like fine pâté, no trace of the raw horror from before. She swallowed, the warmth spreading through her, and washed it down with a deep draught of sacramental wine —tart and heady, sealing the communion.The ritual bound her deeper, the light within flaring brighter amid the chants.

The ritual's echoes faded, giving way to fellowship. Reginald led the assembly back to the great oak table, now laden anew with the finest delicacies: platters of roasted pheasant glazed in honey, succulent lamb with mint, caviar on delicate blinis, ripe figs bursting with sweetness, cheeses from France veined blue and creamy, and flagons of rich Burgundy and port. The torches flickered warmly on the stone walls, casting a cozy glow that made the crypt feel like a hidden banquet hall of ancient kings.They dined with relish, the earlier intensity softened by wine and satiation. Aristocrats in loosened robes pinched grapes delicately, savoring the burst of juice, while artists and immigrants alike passed dishes with easy camaraderie.A portly gentleman with a monocle raised his goblet.

"To the eternal light," he toasted, and murmurs of agreement rose.

Conversation turned to poetry. One member, a scholarly type with ink-stained fingers, recited from Ovid's Metamorphoses, his voice resonant:

"Aurora, watchful in the reddening dawn, threw wide her crimson doors and rose-filled halls; the stars took flight, in marshalled order set by Lucifer who left his station last."

Another followed with a fragment from Virgil's Georgics:

"Lucifer, the light-bringer, rises to herald the day, scattering the shadows of night."

An older woman, her accent hinting at distant travels, shared an ancient Akkadian hymn to Ishtar, translated softly:

"Lady of ladies, goddess of goddesses, Ishtar, queen of all peoples... You are the light that rises in the heavens, the torch of the gods."

The atmosphere grew warmer, laughter mingling with the verses, the flickering torches dancing shadows across faces alight with shared purpose.Later, a quiet guest—a former church organist turned seeker—produced a small portative organ, its pipes gleaming. He played a haunting melody, notes from old Gregorian chants twisted into something ethereal and defiant, filling the crypt with resonant beauty.

As the hours waned, the assembly dispersed, embraces warm and lingering. Eliza boarded her waiting carriage, the ride home a gentle sway through silent streets, her stomach pleasantly full from the tender liver and fine wine.

She slept deeply, contentedly.Morning brought her to the office, where she delved into archived periodicals on Victorian occult societies.

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in 1888 by William Wynn Westcott, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, and William Robert Woodman, practiced ceremonial magic, Kabbalah, astrology, and tarot—drawing elite members like W.B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley, emphasizing personal spiritual evolution through ritual.

The Theosophical Society, established in London in 1878 under Helena Blavatsky's influence, promoted Eastern mysticism, reincarnation, and universal brotherhood—rivaling more ritual-focused groups with its philosophical bent.

The Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, a Masonic offshoot for Christian Rosicrucians, influenced the Golden Dawn's founders with esoteric Christianity and alchemy.

Spiritualist associations abounded: the London Spiritualist Alliance, Marylebone Association, and East London groups focused on séances and mediumship, often clashing with occultists who viewed them as passive.

Freemasonry's many lodges incorporated symbolic rituals, sometimes overlapping with occult interests but remaining more fraternal.
Eliza read with fascination—the landscape teemed with organizations, each pursuing hidden knowledge:
Golden Dawn's magic versus Theosophy's Eastern wisdom, Spiritualists' communications with the dead against Rosicrucian alchemy.
Rivalries emerged plainly—Blavatsky denounced ritual magic; Golden Dawn members mocked Spiritualism's lack of discipline; factions splintered over leadership and purity of doctrine.
A web of competition and cross-pollination, all beneath society's surface. The Order of the Fallen Star, she realized, was but one thread in this vast, contentious tapestry—perhaps the darkest, most defiant.Percy glanced over.
“Finding anything useful?”
“More than I expected,” she murmured.
“The occult world is a battlefield of ideas. No wonder they guard their secrets so fiercely.”

Months slipped by like shadows in the fog, Eliza's life weaving ever tighter into the Order's embrace. She attended every Saturday rite, and often midweek gatherings in hidden parlors or abandoned warehouses, reciting the ancient texts with fervent precision—the Gospel of Thomas, the Liber Lucis Nigrae—words that now burned in her memory like sacred brands. At home, beneath the watchful gaze of her bronze Pan, she delved into deep meditations: sitting cross-legged by candlelight, breathing slow and deliberate, seeking the inner light Reginald had promised. One evening it came—a radiant warmth blooming in her chest, expanding like dawn over a barren plain, filling her with unshakeable certainty. The teachings were true; the light was real, not metaphor but living force.She spoke often with Reginald in quiet corners after rituals, her voice hushed with awe.
"I feel it now, my lord—the greatness shining within. It's as though the veil has torn, and I see the tyranny of the flesh for what it is."
He would smile, scar creasing, and reply,
"You have awakened, sister. The Bringer rewards those who seek without fear. Carry that light; let it consume your doubts."
One crisp Saturday in late autumn, Eliza hailed a carriage to St. Paul's, the dome looming like a sentinel under scudding clouds. She descended the familiar stairs, the damp stone welcoming her like an old friend. The crypt filled with robed figures—forty now, the Order growing in whispers. The missa began: torches ignited in a ring, flames dancing shadows across the vaults. Ancient poems were recited—Ovid's evocation of Prometheus, Akkadian hymns to the star-goddess—voices rising in harmony. Bowls of belladonna-laced absinthe passed; pipes of opium glowed. Eliza smoked deeply, the sweet haze unfolding visions at the edges of sight—serpents coiling through golden flames. She sipped the belladonna brew, bitter and sharp, hallucinations blooming: the walls breathed, the air shimmered with ethereal wings.The assembly moved deeper into the catacombs, torches held high, into a vaulted chamber where a massive stone slab dominated like an ancient altar. Upon it lay a naked woman, bound at wrists and ankles, her eyes wide with terror, a gag muffling her cries. She was middle-aged, plain-faced, perhaps a seamstress or maid—captured, Reginald would later

explain, from a Christian prayer circle.Reginald stepped to the slab, dagger in hand, voice thundering.
"Behold the impure! This wretch worships the dark god of tyranny—the jealous one who demands blood and blind obedience. She is the devil incarnate, spreading chains in the name of false light. O Lucifer, we condemn her to your judgment!"
The woman thrashed, muffled pleas lost in the chant. Four followers advanced, ritual daggers gleaming—two men, two women, faces impassive. They plunged in unison: blades to the heart, a swift slit across the throat. Blood fountained, hot and crimson, pooling on the stone. The woman convulsed, then stilled, eyes glazing.Eliza watched as if in a dream, opium's veil softening the horror into necessity. It made sense—the impure cleansed, the light advanced. Blood was gathered in a silver bowl, mixed with alchemical powders—sulphur, mercury, herbs from distant lands—and ignited with a torch. Blue flames danced, acrid smoke rising like a prayer. The heart and liver were excised with surgical care, placed in another bowl upon the main altar. Reginald raised his arms:
"Accept, O Lucifer, Son of Dawn, this creature's flesh as an offering! The sacrifice of the impure cleanses the heavens, burns away the veil of lies!"
The followers knelt, chanting in Latin:
"Accipe, Lucifer, filius aurorae! Sacrificium impuri purgat caelos! Ave lux aeterna!"
Eliza joined the chorus, the words vibrating in her soul, the light within flaring brighter amid the blood and fire.

The chant faded into reverent silence, the air thick with the coppery tang of blood and the acrid smoke from the burning alchemical mixture. Eliza knelt among the followers, her robes heavy with the night's intensity, the opium's sweet haze deepening the belladonna's sharp bite. Hallucinations bloomed fully now, no longer at the edges but consuming her senses like a living tapestry woven from the crypt's shadows.At first, the visions were subtle: the stone walls of the catacombs rippled like water, veins of quartz pulsing with an inner glow, as though the earth itself breathed in rhythm with her slowing heartbeat. The murdered woman's blood on the slab seemed to flow upward, defying gravity, coiling into serpentine shapes that whispered in tongues she almost understood—ancient Sumerian fragments, perhaps, or the lost Enochian keys Reginald had chanted.
"Liberate... ascend..." they hissed, their voices a chorus of wind through cracked bones.Then the world fractured. The vaulted ceiling dissolved into a vast, starless void, where fallen angels from the murals detached themselves and descended, their wings vast and iridescent, feathers tipped in flame. They circled her, beautiful and terrible, faces shifting—now Reginald's scarred visage, now her own reflection twisted in ecstasy. One angel, crowned in thorns of light, extended a clawed hand; when Eliza reached for it, her fingers passed through, dissolving into golden motes that swirled like fireflies in a storm.Deeper still, hellish landscapes unfolded as Reginald had described in his sermons: endless deserts of obsidian sand under a blood-red sky, where towers of bone rose like accusing fingers. Rivers of liquid fire snaked through the dunes, and from their banks rose spectral figures—the impure, the Christians condemned in the rite—writhing in silent agony, their flesh melting like wax to reveal luminous cores within. Eliza floated above it all, untethered, the light in her chest expanding to match the inferno below. It was not horror, but revelation: the apocalypse

Reginald preached, chaos birthing order, the Empire's sins purged in purifying flame.Amid the blaze, a single point of brilliance emerged—the Bringer himself, Lucifer as a pillar of eternal light, not horned devil but radiant being, his form shifting from lion to serpent to man with eyes like burning stars. He spoke without words, a vibration in her soul: "See the truth, child. The flesh is illusion; the light eternal. Embrace the dawn that consumes."Tears streamed down Eliza's face, hot and real amid the dream. The opium soothed the edges, making the terror exquisite, the belladonna sharpening every detail into crystalline clarity. She understood now, profoundly—the sacrifice was mercy, the blood a bridge to transcendence. The followers around her blurred into angelic hosts, their chants a symphony that harmonized with the visions.Reginald's voice pierced the haze, calling them back: "Rise, brothers and sisters—the offering is accepted."
Eliza blinked, the crypt reforming around her, but the light lingered within, a glowing ember she knew would never fade. The hallucinations receded slowly, leaving her changed, the boundaries between reality and revelation forever blurred.

Reginald stood over the silver bowl, the woman's excised heart and liver glistening within, steam rising faintly from the fresh wounds. He lifted a chalice of sacramental wine—deep crimson, almost black in the flickering light—and poured it slowly over the organs, the liquid cascading in rivulets, mingling with the congealing blood to form a viscous pool.
"With this libation," he declared, voice a low growl,
"we consecrate the impure soul. Her flesh, tainted by the tyrant's lies, shall fuel the grand summoning—the invocation of eternal darkness upon this festering city. London shall plunge into the abyss, where only the one true light shall shine: Lucifer's flame, unyielding and pure. In this chaos, the Empire's sins shall be cleansed, the moral rot exposed and burned away!"
At his signal, followers moved through the assembly, extinguishing torches one by one with sharp breaths. The crypt dimmed to near blackness, shadows swallowing the kneeling figures, until only a single black candle remained alight on the altar—its blue flame steady, a solitary beacon symbolizing the one light that would endure amid the coming night.Reginald paced before it, sweat beading on his forehead, trickling down his scarred cheek like tears of fire. His voice rose furiously, determined and fierce, eyes ablaze with manic zeal, fists clenched as though grasping invisible chains.
"Behold the false order of this crumbling Empire!" he thundered.
"What is London but a monument to urban decay—a labyrinth of fog-choked streets where the poor huddle in squalor, their bodies broken by the mills and factories that feed the greedy maw of progress? Beggars roam the alleys like ghosts, hands outstretched for crumbs from tables laden with stolen wealth, while the aristocracy feasts in gilded halls, blind to the suffering they sow. The moral collapse is upon us: society fractures under the weight of hypocrisy, where the so-called virtuous sell their souls for coin. Witness the moralless women of Whitechapel, peddling their flesh like market meat to survive the cruelties of a world that condemns them while creating their despair!"And who perpetuates this rot? The Christians—these impure devils cloaked in piety! They preach charity from pulpits of gold, tricking the faithful with pleas for donations that line their own pockets, indulging in lavish lifestyles while the flock starves. Their corrupt officials in this very city—bishops and deacons—hoard tithes to build cathedrals of stone, monuments to vanity, while orphans

freeze in the gutters. The greed of the Pope knows no bounds: he sits in Rome upon a throne of blood, demanding tribute from empires, blessing wars that slaughter innocents in the name of a jealous god. Pointless colonial wars rage across the globe—the Empire's vile violence in India, Africa, Afghanistan—spilling rivers of blood for tea and opium, enriching the coffers of the crown while widows mourn and children perish. This is the tyranny we rebel against: a false order built on lies, where the powerful devour the weak under the banner of divine right!"

“But we, the bearers of the true light, shall usher in the apocalypse! Lucifer, the Bringer of Eternal Light, demands this sacrifice—the impure soul's flesh to kindle the flames of renewal. In eternal darkness, the illusions shatter; only his radiance remains, guiding the awakened through the chaos. Rise, O Light-Bringer, and consume the rot! Cleanse the Empire's sins in ritual fire; let moral collapse give way to rebirth! We offer this flesh not in malice, but in mercy—for in death, the impure find freedom, and in summoning, we forge a new dawn!"

The followers bowed lower, murmurs of "Hail Lucifer!" rippling through the gloom.

Eliza, still lost in the opium's dreamlike haze, felt the words sear into her soul—the single candle's flame mirroring the light within her, fierce and unextinguishable.

Day in Office

The ritual's climax ebbed, the air still humming with chants and the acrid scent of alchemical fire. Reginald lowered his arms, the single candle's flame casting long shadows across his scarred face.

"The offering is complete," he declared softly.

"Let us now partake in communion, as brothers and sisters under the one true light"

The assembly rose and moved to the great oak table, laden once more with sumptuous fare: roasted quail in truffle sauce, delicate venison medallions, baskets of fresh bread with herb-infused butter, exotic fruits from the Empire's colonies—pomegranates splitting red, oranges glowing like captured suns—and flagons of aged claret and port. They dined with reverent appetite, the crypt warm and intimate, torches relit to a soft flicker that danced across the stone vaults.Conversation flowed gently:

"The light grows stronger in me each rite," murmured the artist woman beside Eliza, passing a plate of cheeses.

"As does it in you, sister—I see it in your eyes."

A musician among them—a slender man with callused fingers—produced a lute, strumming ancient melodies that echoed through the chamber, notes weaving with the clink of goblets and low laughter.As the hours waned, the gathering dispersed, embraces warm in the chill air. Eliza ascended the stairs, emerging into the night where a black carriage waited, its driver a silent Order member in livery. He helped her in without a word; no payment was expected, for the Order provided for its own. The ride home was smooth, the city's gas lamps blurring past as exhaustion claimed her.She fell asleep the moment her head touched the pillow, dreams laced with flickering light.Morning dawned grey and damp. Eliza dressed and slipped out to the apothecary on Tottenham Court Road, a dim shop smelling of herbs and ether. The need for opium had grown beyond the rites—a gentle craving for its soothing haze. "A bottle

of laudanum, please," she said to the chemist, who handed over the tincture without question—common as aspirin in those days. At home, she measured ten drops into water, sipping slowly; the warmth spread, easing the world's sharp edges.Then to the office, where she pored over more old clippings—dusty accounts of unsolved assaults in the East End, whispers of gangs or lone predators. Percy was out chasing a lead when a knock echoed at the door.A tall man in a rumpled overcoat entered, badge glinting: Inspector Edmund Vale of Scotland Yard. He spoke first to Percy, who had just returned.

"I'm here about that article in your rag—the one speculating on the Ripper. Mentioned a 'Jacques le Rippe' theory. Who's the writer?"

Percy nodded toward Eliza's small room.

"Miss Hawthorne. Sharp as a tack—she spotted it."

Vale entered, hat in hand, and sat uninvited, pulling out a briar pipe and lighting it with a match. Puffing slowly, he fixed her with sharp eyes.

"Miss Hawthorne. Explain this 'Jacques le Rippe' business. Why French? Why such a name at all?"

Eliza spread the facsimile letter on the desk.

"Look at the signature: 'Jack the Rippe'—then a space, and 'R'. Not 'Ripper' as one word. It's like he's signing 'Rippe, R.'—perhaps 'Jacques le Rippe,' a play on words. Mocking you all, stating his name in plain sight while you chase a phantom nickname."

Vale leaned forward, pipe smoke curling.

"Clever. A dark game, indeed. Wordplay to taunt the Yard—we've missed worse. French origin, you think? Some foreigner—doctor, perhaps, with those surgical cuts. Roaming Whitechapel, preying on the vulnerable. We'll investigate the name as a lead now—check passenger lists, medical registers for any 'Rippe' or variants."

He puffed thoughtfully.

"These murders... they haunt me, Miss Hawthorne. Vile darkness in them—women gutted like fish, organs taken. Can't sleep at night, visions of those alleys. If this 'Rippe' is our man, you've given us a thread to pull."

Eliza nodded.

"It's just a theory, but the letter screams mockery. He's laughing at the chase."

Vale knocked out his pipe on the ashtray.

"A good theory. We'll be in contact—might need more from you."

He rose, tipping his hat.

"Stay safe. The streets aren't kind these days."

As he left, Eliza stared at the letter, the 'R' mocking her too. The Ripper's game deepened, but so did her resolve—the Order's light would expose all shadows in time.

Inspector Edmund Vale was born in 1850 to a minor branch of an old Yorkshire family, the Vales of Leeds—distant cousins to earls who had long since squandered their fortunes on colonial ventures and ill-advised investments. His father, a retired army captain scarred from the Crimea, drowned his failures in gin and laudanum, leaving young Edmund to care for a fragile mother haunted by whispers of "family curses" and unexplained visions. Whispers in the household spoke of a distant ancestor—a 17th-century alchemist accused of trafficking with "fallen spirits"—whose bloodline carried a taint, granting uncanny insights but cursing

with isolation. Edmund dismissed it as superstition, yet from boyhood he possessed an eerie knack for deduction: spotting lies in a glance, unraveling riddles that baffled his tutors.Orphaned at fifteen when cholera claimed his parents, Vale was taken in by a stern uncle in London, a barrister who drilled him in logic and law. He joined the Metropolitan Police in 1870, starting as a constable in the fog-choked streets of Whitechapel, where he honed his skills amid pickpockets and gin-soaked brawls. His rise was swift: by 1880, he was a detective sergeant, solving a string of forgery cases that implicated corrupt officials. Vale's methods were unorthodox—disguises that transformed him from dandy to docker, a custom walking stick concealing a blade etched with runes (a relic from his family's occult heirlooms, wielded more for symbolism than steel). Colleagues whispered he had "the devil's own luck," but Vale attributed it to observation: the twitch of a liar's eye, the scent of fear on a coat.In 1888, the Ripper murders thrust him into nightmare. Assigned to the case after the second killing, Vale pored over the scenes—throats slit with surgical precision, organs excised like anatomical trophies. He theorized a killer with medical knowledge, perhaps a Harley Street surgeon slumming in the East End, or a foreigner versed in anatomy. He haunted opium dens and taverns, disguised as a down-and-out clerk, interrogating witnesses who spoke of "shadowy gentlemen" vanishing into the fog. Yet leads evaporated: alibis ironclad, suspects vanishing like smoke. Vale's frustration mounted—nights haunted by visions of mutilated women, his family's "curse" stirring doubts. Was the Ripper mere madman, or something darker, tied to whispers of esoteric societies he had encountered in past cases? He hadn't solved it because the murders defied logic: no motive beyond savagery, no pattern beyond Whitechapel's vulnerable. Political pressure from above stifled radical theories—hints of aristocratic involvement quashed. Vale's moral code clashed with the Yard's bureaucracy; he refused bribes, pursued hunches alone, alienating superiors. Deep down, he sensed a veil over the crimes, perhaps occult in nature, echoing his ancestor's grimoires hidden in his cluttered lodgings—a home crammed with case artifacts and a sword-cane humming with unexplained energy.Tied inexorably to the Ripper, Vale vowed justice, his noble bearing masking inner turmoil. In a city rotting from within, he was the lone light in the fog—proper, unyielding, forever chasing shadows that mirrored his own haunted blood.

Eliza spent the following days immersed in the Ripper's shadow, gathering clippings from the office morgue—yellowed broadsheets detailing the canonical murders' precise locations. Mary Ann Nichols in Buck's Row, Whitechapel, throat slashed and abdomen mutilated. Annie Chapman at 29 Hanbury Street, Spitalfields, uterus removed. Elizabeth Stride in Dutfield's Yard off Berner Street, a single cut before interruption. Catherine Eddowes in Mitre Square, Aldgate, kidneys and womb excised. Mary Jane Kelly in 13 Miller's Court, Dorset Street, the most savage—face hacked, body eviscerated indoors. Even earlier ones like Martha Tabram in George Yard and Emma Smith on Osborn Street near Brick Lane. She mapped them mentally, seeking patterns—stars, sigils, anything symbolic—but found only the random sprawl of Whitechapel's poverty. One crisp afternoon, she hailed a carriage to Whitechapel, the horse's hooves clattering over cobbles as they passed gaslit shops and bustling markets. The driver eyed her curiously—a lone woman in the Ripper's domain—but said nothing. She alighted near Buck's Row, now shadowed by warehouses, and stood where Nichols had lain, the spot unmarked save for her imagination: blood pooling, fog swallowing

screams. No logic here. On to Hanbury Street, a dingy courtyard echoing with children's shouts; Dutfield's Yard, narrow and oppressive; Mitre Square, its stones cold underfoot; Miller's Court, a squalid alley reeking of gin and despair. Hours passed walking these haunted paths, the city's grime clinging to her skirts, but no pattern emerged—merely the geography of desperation. As dusk fell, hunger gnawed; she ducked into a small cafe on Commercial Street, a smoky den with scarred tables and the sizzle of grease.
"Meat pie and tea," she ordered, the proprietor nodding gruffly. She ate in silence, the pie's flaky crust and savory filling a brief comfort, sipping the bitter brew while watching the patrons: rough laborers nursing pints, weary women with hollow eyes, shadowy men in caps. Any could be him—Jack the Ripper—blending into the crowd, no one suspecting the monster beneath. She left as night deepened, walking aimlessly for another hour through emptying streets, gas lamps flickering to life. Turning into a narrow, unlit alley off Brick Lane—echoing Osborn Street's grim history—she froze. A man in a dark cloak crouched over a prone body, his back to her. The cloak bore a red star emblem—the Order's sigil. He turned sharply, face shadowed, and bolted into the gloom.Heart pounding, Eliza approached. The victim—a woman, skirts hiked—was dead, stomach gashed open, blood pooling black in the dim light. Worst: the entrails pulled forth, arranged deliberately into an inverted pentagram, points glistening crimson.Bile rose; Eliza retched, staggering back. She fled the alley, breath ragged, and flagged a passing carriage.
"Bloomsbury—quickly!" The ride blurred, her mind reeling.Home, she poured twenty drops of laudanum into water, twice her usual, and sank into the armchair. The liquid warmed her, easing the nausea. “This was another offering—a Christian sacrifice, removal of evil.”
Guilt twisted in her stomach
“Murder, plain and cold”.
Yet justification surged— “The teachings promised purification, the light demanded action against tyranny.” Counterforces warred, was this righteousness or horror?
The laudanum claimed her, visions softening, and she slept, convinced at last: a necessary deed for the greater dawn.

The next morning brought no relief. Eliza woke with a gnawing ache deep in her chest, the laudanum's haze burned away by the vivid memory of the alley: the woman's eviscerated body, the inverted pentagram glistening in blood, the fleeing figure with the Order's red star on his cloak. She paced her small room, the bronze Pan watching impassively from the table. If the killer left entrails arranged in ritual sigils—Whitechapel's streets again the canvas—could "Jack the Ripper" be one of them? A member of the Order, cleansing the impure under cover of the infamous phantom? The thought twisted like a knife: the light she revered, twisted into common slaughter?She could not bear the uncertainty. By midday she hailed a carriage to Ludgate Hill, the familiar descent into the catacombs feeling heavier than ever. The crypt was quiet, only a few hooded figures tending braziers. She found Reginald in a back chamber—a small study lined with ancient tomes and flickering candles—seated at a desk, quill in hand.
"My lord," she said, voice trembling despite her resolve, "last night in Whitechapel I saw... a woman slain. Stomach opened, entrails in an inverted pentagram. The killer wore our emblem. Tell me—is the Ripper one of us?"

Reginald looked up calmly, no flicker of surprise. He set the quill aside, drew a card from a drawer—thick ivory stock, edges gilded with intricate golden arabesques of serpents and stars—and handed it to her.
"17 Grosvenor Crescent, Belgravia," he read aloud softly. "Come tonight, Eliza. Alone. I will explain what must be explained."
He rose, excusing himself with a gentle nod.
"Other matters demand me now. Until evening."
Eliza stood alone, turning the card in her fingers. It was exquisite—expensive paper, the gold leaf catching the candlelight like captured flame. She pocketed it, ascended the stairs, and took a carriage home, the gnawing doubt now laced with anticipation.At her lodgings she measured ten drops of laudanum into water, the familiar warmth steadying her hands. She washed thoroughly, dressed in her finest gown—deep emerald silk, high-necked but elegant—pinned her hair, and cooked a simple supper of eggs and toast. Afterward she read by gaslight, a volume of Gnostic hymns, until evening shadows lengthened.At eight o'clock she stepped into the street and hailed another carriage. The ride took her westward through the city's shifting layers: from Bloomsbury's respectable terraces, past the glittering shops of Oxford Street, into the hushed grandeur of Mayfair and Belgravia. Gas lamps burned brighter here, carriages gleamed with polish, the air carried scents of coal from discreetly hidden chimneys rather than the river's stink. Grosvenor Crescent curved elegantly, its white-stucco facades rising four stories, wrought-iron balconies blooming with winter evergreens, liveried footmen at polished doors.Number 17 stood at the crescent's graceful sweep—a palace in miniature, columns flanking the entrance, windows glowing with soft lamplight behind heavy velvet drapes. Eliza alighted, paid the driver, and climbed the marble steps. She knocked twice, the sound echoing firmly.Time passed—perhaps a minute—before the door opened. A tall servant in impeccable dark livery regarded her without expression, then stepped aside.
"Miss Hawthorne. His lordship awaits."She entered a marble foyer, chandelier crystals tinkling faintly overhead.
Soon Reginald descended the sweeping staircase, dressed in evening black, the scar silver in the lamplight.
"Eliza," he greeted warmly, taking her hand.
"Come."He led her through double doors into a lavish drawing room: walls paneled in dark walnut hung with oil paintings—scenes of fallen angels, alchemical tableaux, portraits of stern ancestors; furniture of carved mahogany and brocade; a massive fireplace where logs crackled; Persian rugs thick underfoot; glass cabinets displaying ancient grimoires and curious artifacts that gleamed with gold and jewel-light. Wealth breathed from every corner—a true palace hidden in London's heart.Reginald indicated a velvet chaise.
"Sit, please." The servant appeared silently, pouring deep ruby port into crystal glasses, then withdrew, closing the doors with a soft click.Eliza settled, the room's opulence enveloping her like incense, the card's golden patterns still vivid in her memory as she waited for Reginald to speak.

Eliza sat rigid on the velvet chaise, the lavish drawing room's opulence suddenly oppressive—the flickering firelight dancing on the intricate paintings of fallen angels, the heavy scent of beeswax and aged leather closing in like a shroud. The port trembled in her glass; she set it

down before it spilled. Reginald watched her calmly from his armchair, the scar on his face a silver seam in the lamplight.She could hold back no longer.
"I saw this woman in Whitechapel," she burst out, voice cracking. "Her stomach was opened, intestines laid out in... in our sigil. Did someone from our Order do it? Is Jack the Ripper someone you know?"
Reginald poured himself a measure of cognac from a crystal decanter, the amber liquid glinting as he swirled it. He took a slow sip, unperturbed.
"No, it is not what you think. I don't know who Jack the Ripper is. You see, there is a bit more complicated matter involved. Our followers frequent Whitechapel—seeking the lost, the impure. In two instances, they came upon dead bodies, fresh kills. Our Order's instructions permit the collection of hearts and livers for sacrifice, and Christian offerings are allowed. But we don't butcher on the streets. As it happened, those two bodies later turned out to be two of the Ripper's victims. And these members... used the chance to remove some organs. You know—for the rituals."
Eliza stared at him, puzzled, her mind reeling.
"So what does it mean? You mean the Ripper did not remove the organs from the victims?"Reginald nodded, setting his glass down.
"Yes. He is just someone who made the murders—the throats, the initial savagery. The organ removal is from the Order, opportunistic. One thing is certain: these people were murdered by the Ripper, and we don't know who he is. He is definitely not a member of our Order. I see the organ removal as just an operation necessary to collect sacrificial material. They would have been removed anyway in the mortuary later.
"Eliza's face paled. "Yes, but they are human beings. Oh my God, what have you done!"
She hesitated, then added,
"There's more. An inspector from Scotland Yard—Edmund Vale—visited my office. He's investigating anything suspicious about the Ripper. He took my theory on the name seriously."
Reginald smiled faintly, a predator's calm.
"Easy now, child. You are not going to betray the Light now, are you? Remember that you have partaken in human sacrifice rituals, in ritual killing, and also consumed human flesh. How would the inspector look upon that, what do you think?"
Eliza's face went blank, blood draining from her cheeks. "Human flesh... do you mean... I... I... consumed...?"
She lurched forward, vomiting violently onto the Persian rug, the acrid bile mixing with the remnants of her earlier meal. Gasping, she wiped her mouth with a trembling hand.
"I thought it was the ram's liver... I did not mean to..."Reginald's smile didn't waver.
"For the ritual purposes, this was necessary. It is the consumption of flesh, to devour its own essence—a mockery of the physical body to uphold the light. The impure's organs, transmuted through fire and wine, bind us to the eternal. You understand now, don't you?"

Eliza slumped back, the room spinning. She was neck-deep in this—witness to murder, participant in rites, consumer of the forbidden. Guilt clawed at her, but the teachings whispered justification: necessary for the light, against the greater evil. There was no turning

back; to speak would damn her utterly. She nodded weakly, acceptance settling like lead in her gut. The Order was her world now—secrets buried, light pursued, no matter the cost.

Reginald set his cognac down, the crystal chiming softly against the polished table.
"Stay for dinner, Eliza. The cook has prepared venison—rare, as you might appreciate now."She shook her head, stomach still churning.
"I... I don't feel well. Forgive me.
" She rose unsteadily, the room's lavish warmth now suffocating—the intricate paintings seeming to leer, the heavy drapes closing in.Reginald nodded graciously.
"As you wish. Rest, child. The light will guide you."
Eliza fled the palace-like home, hailing a carriage in the crisp Belgravia night. The ride blurred—elegant facades giving way to Bloomsbury's modest terraces. At her lodgings, she poured twenty drops of laudanum into water, twice her usual, and swallowed it down. The mist claimed her; she collapsed into bed, sleep a black void.Days dissolved into haze—a week lost to laudanum's embrace. She rose only for necessities, measuring drops with trembling hands, sinking back into dreamless oblivion. The gnawing guilt dulled, the horror of consumption fading into numb acceptance. Finally, she dragged herself to the office, pale and hollow-eyed. Percy frowned but said nothing. Mid-morning, Inspector Edmund Vale arrived, hat in hand, pipe unlit.
"Miss Hawthorne," he began, settling into the chair.
"About Jacques le Rippe—we pursued it. Found a man: Jacques le Rippe, minor French nobility. Visited London during the murders—stayed in Mayfair, frequented the East End for 'amusements.' Left for Paris two weeks ago."
Eliza leaned forward. "And the killings?"
Vale shrugged.
"If no more bodies turn up, he might be our man. But if another strikes... well, back to the fog."
She nodded.
"It's likely him—a sick maniac playing games, taunting with his own name."
Vale's eyes sharpened.
"Perhaps. I'll stop by with news."
He rose, tipping his hat.
"Stay vigilant."After he left, Eliza turned to Percy.
"French noble—fits the profile: access, education, twisted leisure."
Percy whistled.
"Let's write it: 'The Mysterious Jacques le Rippe: French Noble or Whitechapel Fiend?' Speculate, but nothing certain—no libel."
They drafted quickly, Eliza weaving in the noble's visit without accusation.

Home again, Saturday loomed. She took a carriage to St. Paul's, descending into the familiar catacombs. Robes donned, she was approached by a rogue occult scholar—a gaunt man with wild eyes and a tattered robe, clutching a forbidden tome."Sister Eliza," he whispered, drawing her aside.
"I heard of your upset—the organ consumption. Let me ease your mind."

She stiffened. "How did you—?"
He waved a hand.
"Whispers travel. Sister, let me tell you something, consider ancient Egyptian rites - in mummification, the body was sacred vessel. Priests removed organs through incisions—liver, lungs, intestines, stomach—stored in canopic jars guarded by gods like Imsety and Duamutef. But in occult circles, consumption was key: eating the liver transferred the deceased's power, devouring the heart absorbed their essence. From a ritual perspective, it's empowerment—mocking death, claiming vitality. The impure's flesh fuels the light, transmuting corruption into purity. I assure you, it's ancient wisdom, not barbarism."
Eliza listened. "It... makes sense. Power through sacrifice."
He nodded fervently.
"Exactly, sister. The light demands it."
The scholar drew Eliza deeper into the shadowed alcove, his voice a low, mesmerizing drone amid the flickering torchlight.
"Come, sister, let me illuminate further. You question the consumption of organs, but ancient wisdom holds the key. Consider the Egyptians—their mummification rites were not mere preservation, but a sacred alchemy of body and soul."
He paced slowly, gesturing with ink-stained hands.
"In the Old Kingdom, around 2600 BCE, the process began with the deceased washed in Nile water, symbolizing rebirth. Priests, masked as gods like Anubis the jackal-headed embalmer, made the first incision on the left flank with a flint knife—never iron, lest it corrupt the purity. Through this cut, they removed the viscera: lungs, stomach, intestines, liver—each organ sacred, embodying aspects of the ka and ba, the life force and personality. The brain, deemed useless for the afterlife, was hooked out through the nose and discarded. But the heart—ah, the heart remained, seat of the soul, to be weighed against Maat's feather in Osiris's hall."
“These organs were not wasted. Washed in wine and natron salt, they were placed in canopic jars—four vessels guarded by the sons of Horus: Imsety for the liver, human-headed protector of direction; Hapi, baboon-headed for the lungs; Duamutef, jackal for the stomach; Qebehsenuef, falcon for the intestines. Lids carved as these gods sealed them, spells from the Book of the Dead inscribed to ensure resurrection. In some esoteric cults—whispered in the temples of Thebes—priests consumed symbolic portions, believing it transferred the deceased's essence, granting divine insight or prolonging life. This was no barbarism, but communion: devouring to internalize power, transcending mortality."
Eliza listened, the opium's residual haze softening her doubt.
"But... human organs? In our rites?"
The scholar's eyes gleamed.
"Precisely as the Gnostics understood sacrifice. In the second century CE, sects like the Valentinians and Sethians viewed the material world as a prison crafted by the Demiurge—that jealous, false god of the Old Testament. The body was his chain; the soul, a spark of divine light trapped within. Human sacrifice, in their esoteric views, was not murder but liberation—a ritual inversion to mock the creator's tyranny. By offering the flesh, they freed the pneuma, the spirit, allowing ascension to the Pleroma, the true divine realm. Texts like the Gospel of Philip speak of sacraments where consumption symbolized union: 'He who eats

my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me'—not the Christian Eucharist, but a deeper mystery, devouring the impure to purify oneself."
“In ancient times, from Carthage's child offerings to Baal to Aztec heart extractions for Huitzilopochtli, consumption empowered the consumer—absorbing vitality, appeasing gods, ensuring cosmic balance. Our Order echoes this: the impure's flesh, ritually taken, mocks the Demiurge's creation, fueling our light. It is right, sister—necessary for transcendence."
Eliza's breath steadied, the logic weaving through her turmoil.
"I... see now. It's not horror, but... elevation."
He nodded approvingly. "Yes. Embrace it, and the light grows brighter."

Eliza lingered in the alcove, the scholar's words settling like balm on her troubled mind. Yet one doubt remained.
"But Reginald says the evil god demands virgin sacrifice—and this is evil. How then is our sacrifice any different?"
The scholar nodded gravely, his wild eyes softening.
"You see, child, the evil god—the Demiurge—demands sacrifice out of hatred, a craving for blood, for murder itself. He revels in destruction and torment, spilling innocent life to feed his delusion of divinity, to assert superiority through fear and pain. It is worship born of terror, sustaining a prison of suffering."
He leaned closer, voice fervent.
"But our offering is of different nature. It is deliberate mockery of the evil god and his flawed creation—the physical body, this trap of material suffering, decay, and illusion. By dissolving the flesh in ritual, we free the trapped soul, the divine spark, allowing it to ascend beyond the Demiurge's chains. We do not crave blood for its own sake; we transcend it, inverting the tyrant's rites to liberate rather than enslave."
Eliza's eyes cleared, understanding flooding her like dawn light.
"I see, brother. It all makes sense to me now. In this case... it is right."
A tentative smile touched her lips, the first genuine one in days.The scholar patted her shoulder paternally, his hand warm and steady.
"Good, child. The light rewards the seeker."
He turned and vanished into the shadows.Calm filled Eliza's body, a profound peace washing away the last remnants of horror. What she had feared as a bloodthirsty cult revealed itself as profound philosophy—deeper meaning, liberation through inversion. She joined the others in the dining chamber, the great oak table groaning under lavish fare: roast pheasant, glazed ham, oysters on ice, fine cheeses, and decanters of claret.Reginald entered moments later, his face shining with serene peace, scar softened in the torchlight.
He took the seat beside her.
"Thank you," Eliza said quietly, meeting his gaze. "I understand now."
He smiled, satisfaction in his eyes.
"Bless you, child of the Order. Understanding comes to all who look deep enough."
Servants filled their plates; Eliza began eating, the rich flavors grounding her in the moment. Conversation turned to worldly matters.
"This city," Reginald mused, slicing pheasant,

"its social order is a farce—elites hoarding wealth while the poor rot in slums. Poverty devours the spirit as surely as any blade."
Eliza nodded.
"I've seen it daily in Whitechapel. I barely make ends meet myself—pennies from articles, scraping for rent."
Reginald set down his knife, brow furrowing.
"Child, why did you not speak of this before? The Order takes care of its own."
He paused, thoughtful.
"From next month, you shall receive £8 monthly—enough for comfortable lodgings, good food, and modest luxuries. No more want."
Eliza's eyes widened—eight pounds was a clerk's salary, far beyond her journalist scraps.
"My lord... thank you. Truly."
He waved it away.
"It is nothing. Our organization spans England—branches in Manchester, Edinburgh, even secret cells in Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg. Wealthy members—lords, industrialists, scholars—contribute generously. We aid one another with funds, connections, protection. The light binds us; no true seeker suffers alone."
An artist across the table raised his glass.
"To the Order's bounty!"
Eliza joined the toast, warmth spreading through her—not just from wine, but belonging. The deeper meaning held firm; she was home.

The feast continued in warm camaraderie, goblets refilled, platters passed with easy laughter. The crypt's torches cast a golden glow over the table, the lavish spread—roast pheasant, honeyed ham, fresh oysters, and ripe fruits—diminishing steadily amid appreciative murmurs.Reginald raised his glass midway through the meal, commanding gentle attention.
"Brothers and sisters, I bring glad tidings of deeds done in the light's name. Last week, we opened a soup kitchen in Whitechapel—simple fare, hot soup and meat pie twice daily for the destitute. The Lord approves such works, for the means of living are not equal to all; many suffer through no fault of their own. The poorest shall no longer starve while we feast."
A ripple of approval passed around the table. The artist woman smiled.
"A true mercy, my lord. The streets swallow so many."
Reginald nodded.
"And more: we have secured a lodging house nearby—clean beds, warm hearths—where the homeless may sleep instead of freezing on cold cobbles. I condemn the city mayor and his council for their neglect; they hoard taxes for monuments while children perish in alleys. Shame upon them."An older aristocrat lifted his glass.
"Well said! The light demands justice here as below."
Reginald continued, voice resonant.
"Remember always: the Order accepts souls of all backgrounds—rich or ragged, noble or common. The Light does not distinguish between physical bodies; it seeks only minds that can see, hearts open to truth. Thousands now walk this path—eighty strong here beneath St. Paul's, with branches in Manchester, Edinburgh, Paris, Berlin, even distant Moscow. Our numbers grow, bound by the eternal flame."

Eliza felt pride swell within her.
"It's wondrous," she said softly to the woman beside her.
"To think we aid the suffering while pursuing the greater work."
The woman squeezed her hand.
"The light balances mercy and judgment, sister."As plates emptied, musicians took position—a slender follower with a silver flute, another at the small portative organ. Ancient melodies filled the chamber: haunting airs from medieval plainsong, twisted with minor keys, evoking lost temples and starlit deserts. The table fell quiet, faces serene in the flickering light, souls lifted by the notes.When the music faded, Reginald turned to Eliza.
"Come with me, child. The hour is late, and the cathedral above sleeps. I would show you its wonders under the moon's watchful eye."
She rose, curiosity piqued. They ascended the familiar stairs, emerging through the small oak door into the vast, silent nave of St. Paul's. The great dome loomed overhead like a frozen sky; moonlight filtered through high windows, silvering the marble floors and gilded mosaics. Reginald produced a heavy iron key from his robe, locking the side door behind them with a soft click.The cathedral was theirs alone—echoing emptiness, the scent of incense and polished stone. Reginald gestured grandly.
"Behold Wren's masterpiece, built upon older sacred ground. Come—I will show you its secrets."
He led her forward into the shadowed grandeur, ready to unveil the details layer by layer.

Reginald led Eliza through the silent nave, their footsteps echoing softly on the marble floor like whispers in an empty confessional. Moonlight poured through the high windows, silvering the vast space, while the great dome above hung like a frozen firmament, immense and indifferent.He stopped beneath its center, gesturing upward with a sweep of his arm.
"To the uninitiated eye, St. Paul’s appears a triumph of Christian order—stone disciplined into symmetry, light obediently descending from the dome. Yet to the gnostic imagination, child, the building speaks in a quieter, double language—one inherited from antiquity and half-buried beneath Anglican restraint."
Eliza tilted her head back, awed by the soaring height.
"It feels... vast. Almost oppressive."Reginald smiled faintly.
"Exactly. The great dome echoes the Roman Pantheon—not merely heaven above, but the Pleroma, the fullness of divine knowledge hovering beyond the reach of the nave below. Worshippers walk beneath it as souls trapped in the lower world, sensing perfection yet unable to touch it. They gaze up, yearning, but remain bound to the floor."
He guided her toward the Whispering Gallery stairs, his voice low.
"And this gallery above—where words travel unseen across the curve, heard only by those positioned correctly—becomes a perfect metaphor for gnosis itself: knowledge that moves secretly, bypassing authority, revealed only to the attuned ear."
They paused along the aisles, moonlight glinting on marble monuments. Reginald pointed to a carved female figure, serene and robed.
"Officially, she is Wisdom, honoring the dead. But see how she points not upward to their God, but inward—toward contemplation. To us, she resembles Sophia, the fallen aeon—wisdom estranged from the divine source, trapped in matter. The cathedral commemorates

her but refuses to enthrone her, as though acknowledging wisdom's power yet fearing its liberation.
"Nearby, another statue—a winged woman with trumpet raised. "Fame," Reginald said softly. "Proclaiming human achievement. In their reading, a virtue. In ours, a vice—the Demiurge's hollow reward. She binds the soul to remembrance by men, not reunion with the divine. Where Sophia whispers inwardly, Fame shouts outwardly. Notice how loud she is, yet empty."
Eliza traced the cool marble with her fingers.
"And the bare walls—no painted saints?"
Reginald nodded approvingly.
"Precisely. The absence speaks volumes. Images lie, fixing truth into false permanence. The cathedral avoids iconography not from Protestant humility, but an unspoken admission: the divine cannot be safely depicted within the material realm. To show it would be to chain it."
They circled toward the dome's base, where mosaics depicted St. Paul's conversion.
"Even Paul himself takes a dual role," Reginald murmured.
"The Church claims him as its architect; gnostic tradition remembers him teaching hidden wisdom—rulers of this world, mysteries unfit for public ears. Placed beneath the dome yet never reaching it, he is the intermediary: one who knew, but could not fully disclose.
"Finally, he gestured downward.
"The crypt below—vast, ordered, filled with honored bones of kings, generals, architects. A map of the lower cosmos, where all are equalized by matter. Above rises geometry and light; above that, the unreachable fullness. The soul must pass upward not by rank or fame, but by knowledge alone."
Eliza stood silent, the cathedral's contradictions unfolding before her like a secret scripture.
"It's not a monument of faith," she whispered, "but of tension."
Reginald placed a hand on her shoulder.
"Exactly, child. It teaches not through doctrine, but through contradiction—inviting the attentive to suspect that salvation lies not in the structure itself, but in seeing through it."

The tour concluded beneath the great dome, Reginald's final words lingering in the vast silence like echoes of forgotten truths.
"Enough for tonight," he said softly.
"The stones have spoken; let them settle in your heart."
They descended the spiral stairs once more, the cathedral's grandeur giving way to the familiar damp embrace of the catacombs. The assembly had thinned; a few lingered at the table, nursing final glasses of wine.Reginald drew Eliza aside into a shadowed alcove.
"Child, a small task for you tomorrow. There is a package to collect and deliver here." He pressed a folded paper into her hand—simple, with an address scrawled in his elegant script: Harrison & Sons, 14 Brook Street, Whitechapel.
"Ask for Jack Harrison. Discreetly."She nodded, pocketing it.
"Of course."They rejoined the table briefly, conversation light—whispers of upcoming rites, shared jests about the world above. Soon the gathering dispersed, robes shed, embraces exchanged. Eliza boarded her waiting carriage, the ride home a gentle sway through moonlit streets.Sleep came easily, deep and restorative.She woke early, the winter sun pale through

her window. A quick wash, toast and tea, then a carriage to Whitechapel. The journey took half an hour, past familiar slums and bustling markets, until the carriage halted before a small stone house on Brook Street. Marble slabs were piled in the yard, headstones leaning like silent sentinels; a nearby cemetery stretched gray under bare trees. The sign above the door read Harrison & Sons in somber lettering.Eliza entered, the air cool and laced with formaldehyde. A bell tinkled; a middle-aged man in a dark apron appeared from the back.
"Can I help you, miss?"
"I'm here for Jack Harrison—a package for Mr Reginald."
"He nodded knowingly. "Right this way." He led her to a small office, sparse and tidy. "I'm Jack Harrison. The gentleman's order? Coming right up."
He vanished into the rear, returning with a neat parcel—brown paper, tightly bound, no larger than a hatbox, weighty but not cumbersome.
"Careful with it," he said with a shy smile, handing it over.
Eliza thanked him, curiosity prickling, and returned to the carriage. Straight to St. Paul's, descending into the catacombs where the old scholar waited near the altar.She handed him the package. He accepted it with a wink.
"Ah, thank you, sister. We have a little business with the mortuary—our friend Jack takes care of some things for us, helps the Order."
She said nothing, only nodded, a quiet acceptance settling over her.

Home again, she cooked a hearty meal—mutton stew with carrots and onions, bread fresh from the baker—eating with unexpected gusto, the day's errand fueling rather than troubling her. Afterward, she shopped in Bloomsbury: a new dress of deep burgundy wool, sturdy shoes, and the evening newspaper.Back in her room, she sipped tea laced with ten drops of laudanum, unfolding the paper by gaslight. Headlines blared the usual:
"Zeppelin Trials Over the Channel—Success for German Engineers";
"Irish Home Rule Debates Rage in Parliament";
"Another Factory Strike in Manchester—Workers Demand Fair Wages";
"Society Wedding of the Season: Lord Ashford's Daughter to American Heiress."
The laudanum warmed her veins; the world softened. She read until eyelids drooped, then slept.

Eliza stirred in the dim morning light filtering through her threadbare curtains, the laudanum's haze lifting slowly like fog from the Thames. Her head throbbed faintly, a remnant of the previous night's dose, but her mind was clearer than it had been in weeks—a fragile lucidity that invited unwelcome questions. She lay still, staring at the cracked plaster ceiling, the events of the Order replaying in her thoughts: the bloodied rituals, the radiant visions, the calm assurance of Reginald's voice. Was it all real, or had she descended into a delusion woven from London's own decay?The cult's power—did it truly stem from supernatural forces, from Lucifer as the Bringer of Eternal Light, summoning demons in forgotten tongues and igniting apocalyptic fires? Or was it merely a manifestation of human depravity, amplified by the era's festering social ills? Poverty gnawed at the city's underbelly like a relentless plague; Whitechapel's streets teemed with the desperate, bodies sold for pennies, lives extinguished in gin-soaked oblivion. The Order's sacrifices—those "impure"

Christians offered up—mirrored the Empire's casual brutality: imperialism's distant wars, where brown-skinned souls were harvested for profit, their lands stripped bare to feed London's insatiable maw. Repressed desires simmered beneath Victorian propriety—sex a sin, ambition a vice—driving men and women to secret excesses, orgies of the flesh disguised as spiritual ecstasy.Doubt crept in like cold drafts through the window. What if the hallucinations from belladonna and opium were not divine revelations but chemical tricks, the mind's desperate escape from reality? The light she felt blooming in her chest—could it be mere euphoria, a psychological balm against the grinding hopelessness of her orphaned life, her meager journalist's wage? The organ consumption, once horrifying, now rationalized through the scholar's ancient lore—Egyptian rites freeing the soul, Gnostic mockery of the Demiurge. But was it enlightenment or excuse? Human depravity, after all, thrived in such justifications: the Ripper's blade carving chaos in Whitechapel, perhaps not a madman but a symptom of the same repressed fury that fueled colonial massacres or the elite's hidden vices.Yet reassurances whispered back, soft as Reginald's sermons. The visions felt too vivid for illusion—the warmth of the inner light undeniable, transcending laudanum's fog. If the Order's acts amplified human flaws, was that not supernatural in itself? Lucifer as rebel against tyranny embodied the era's cries for justice: the poor rising against poverty's yoke, the colonized against imperial chains, the repressed against moral shackles. The rituals, bloody as they were, promised cleansing—an apocalypse not of destruction but renewal, dissolving the false order of Empire and Church. Poverty bred desperation; imperialism, cruelty; repression, madness—but the Order channeled these into purpose, inverting suffering into liberation. To doubt now was to betray the light that had pulled her from loneliness.She rose, the philosophical tangle unresolved, a storm calmed but not dispelled. Deep thought yielded no easy answers—only the conviction that truth lay in the tension, much like St. Paul's contradictions. The cult's power, supernatural or human, demanded faith; and in London's moral collapse, faith was all that remained.

Gods Servant

Eliza spent the morning at the office in quiet routine, sifting through a stack of society notices and minor crime reports. She drafted a short piece on rising laudanum prices—ironic, given her own habit—and passed the galleys to Percy with a tired smile.
"Polish it if you like. I'm not sharp today."
Percy eyed her knowingly but only nodded.
"Off early again?"
"Just errands," she murmured, already gathering her things.
Home by midday, the £8 from Reginald burning pleasantly in her thoughts. She ventured to Regent Street shops, indulging for the first time in years: a fine wool cloak in deep midnight blue, kid gloves, a new bonnet with subtle velvet trim, and a small hamper of luxuries—fresh butter, smoked salmon, a wedge of Stilton, ripe pears. The money felt like freedom; poverty's grip loosened.Back in her rooms, she ate heartily—salmon on fresh bread, cheese and fruit—savoring the richness. Then she bathed, dressed in her new finery for the evening, and took a carriage to St. Paul's as dusk fell.The catacombs welcomed her as always. Reginald waited in

his private chamber, candlelit and lined with grimoires. He gestured to a cushioned chair.
"Sit, child. There is a matter of importance."
Eliza obeyed, curiosity sharpening her senses.
"A corrupt Christian bishop—His Grace Edmund Harrowby—preaches charity from his pulpit, wringing donations from the faithful for 'the poor.' Yet he indulges in lavish living: fine wines, silk robes, a carriage drawn by matched greys. He is hypocrisy incarnate."
Reginald leaned forward.
"You, Eliza, with your beauty and grace, will approach him. Tell him you wish to make a donation to his convent's works. Get close. Then invite him here—for a private dinner meeting beneath St. Paul's, to discuss further philanthropy. The Light will serve justice."
Eliza met his gaze steadily.
"I understand. It shall be done."
Reginald handed her a folded paper—an address in Kensington—and a pre-written cheque for £50, signed in her name.
"Use this. He will not resist."
She pocketed both, rose, and departed into the night.

The carriage carried her to a modest yet imposing convent building in a quiet Kensington square—red brick, stained-glass windows glowing faintly. She knocked at the side office door marked "Private."A loud, commanding voice boomed:
"Enter!"
Eliza stepped in. Behind a massive oak desk sat Bishop Edmund Harrowby—a slug-like man, corpulent and florid, slouched in a throne-like chair carved with ecclesiastical motifs. Before him, a silver platter held remnants of roast pheasant and claret; the room reeked of opulence—tapestries, gilded icons, a crystal decanter.His small eyes widened at her appearance; his voice shifted instantly to honeyed silk.
"My dear lady! What a vision you are. Come, sit. How may this humble servant of the Lord assist such beauty?"
Eliza smiled demurely, taking the offered chair.
"Your Grace, I come on business. I have long admired your charitable works. I wish to make a donation."
She handed over the cheque.Harrowby's face lit like sunrise; he snatched it eagerly, scanning the sum.
"Fifty pounds! Bless you, my child. This will do such good—feed the poor, shelter the orphan."
He folded it into his waistcoat pocket with practiced speed.
"And how may I serve you further? A private blessing, perhaps?"
They talked for hours—Eliza flattering his ego. The mask slipped quickly.
"These wretched poor," he confided, leaning back with a fresh glass of claret,
"always begging, breeding like rabbits. A firm hand is needed, not endless coddling. But donations—ah, those keep the Lord's work alive."
He chuckled, unconsciously rubbing his belly. Eliza feigned admiration.

"Your wisdom is evident, Your Grace. Such insight deserves wider hearing. Might you join a select dinner meeting tonight—at St. Paul's? A few devoted patrons wish to discuss greater contributions."
Harrowby's eyes gleamed at the prospect of more coin.
"St. Paul's? An honor! I shall come at once. Lead on, fair lady."
Eliza rose, heart steady.
"A carriage will collect you at ten. Until then."She left him beaming, the trap sweetly baited.

Eliza returned to St. Paul's well before ten, slipping through the small oak door into the catacombs to wait. The crypt was dimly lit, a few torches flickering, the air heavy with incense and anticipation. She paced near the stairs, the emerald silk of her gown whispering against stone.At the stroke of ten, muffled sounds echoed from above—the clatter of hooves, the creak of a carriage door, then heavy footsteps and impatient banging on the cathedral's main doors. Harrowby's voice boomed through the vast nave:
"Hello? Is anyone there? This is Bishop Harrowby—I've been invited!"
Eliza ascended partway and called softly upward.
"Your Grace! The dinner is downstairs, in the older part of the cathedral—a private chamber for our select gathering."
A pause, then delighted chuckle.
"Downstairs, eh? How delightfully mysterious! Lead on, my dear."
She guided him down the winding stairs, his bulk huffing behind her, the scent of his cologne —cloying rosewater—trailing like a cloud. His eyes gleamed greedily in the torchlight, lips moist as he licked them.
"Private indeed. One does appreciate discretion in matters of... generosity."
They entered the dining chamber. The massive oak table groaned under its lavish burden: roast venison in red wine sauce, plump capons, oysters glistening on ice, crystal decanters of claret and brandy, silver bowls of truffles and caviar. Twenty members already sat in silence, with no robes, faces calm. Reginald entered moments later, taking the head seat with a welcoming smile.
"Welcome, Your Grace," Reginald said smoothly, gesturing to the chair beside Eliza.
"We are honored."Harrowby settled heavily, eyes widening at the spread.
"Honored? My dear fellows, the honor is mine! Such a feast—worthy of a bishop's table."
He attacked the venison with gusto, grease shining on his chin.Wine flowed freely. As glasses emptied, Harrowby's tongue loosened, arrogance swelling with each sip.
"You know," he confided loudly, waving a fork, "these sniveling poor—always at the church door with their tales of woe. 'Bless me, Your Grace, the children are starving.' Ha! I tell them, 'The Lord helps those who help themselves—and donates generously to His servants.'"
He roared with laughter, slapping the table.
"Last winter, a widow brought her last shilling for the collection plate. I took it with tears in my eyes—tears of joy, mind you—and used it for a fine Burgundy. She froze that night, poor thing. But charity begins at home, eh?"
Reginald chuckled indulgently. "Wise words, Your Grace. The poor multiply like rabbits; one mustn't encourage sloth."
"Exactly!" Harrowby boomed, face flushed.

"I preach mercy from the pulpit—'Give until it hurts!'—while pocketing thousands. Built myself a little palace in Kensington with their pennies. One old crone accused me of hypocrisy. I told her, 'My child, the Lord chose me to enjoy His bounty so I may better serve.' She died in the workhouse soon after. Providence, I call it!"
Eliza forced a smile, pouring him more claret.
"Your connections must be vast, Your Grace."
"Vast? My dear girl, I dine with dukes! They slip me envelopes 'for the orphans'—orphans who never see a farthing. Ha! One lord said, 'Harrowby, you're the only bishop with a cellar better than mine.' And why not? God's chosen deserve the best!"
The night rolled on quietly, Harrowby's tales growing crueler, his laughter louder.
"There's a joke I tell at clerical dinners: 'Why do the poor die young? So the church can save on burial fees!' Gets a roar every time."
Reginald raised his glass.
"To divine justice, Your Grace."
Harrowby clinked heartily.
"Indeed! But Eliza, dear, your donation—fifty pounds, was it?—will be in excellent hands. The church needs altar repairs... and perhaps a new desk for my office. A bishop must work in comfort to serve the Lord properly!"
Eliza met his greedy gaze coolly.
"Of course, Your Grace. It serves the greater good."
The torches burned lower, the trap closing unseen around the boastful bishop as the night deepened.

Time rolled on in the warm haze of wine and flattery, the torches burning lower as the bishop's arrogance swelled with each refilled glass. Harrowby leaned back in his throne-like chair at the table, face ruddy, gesturing grandly.
"My dear Eliza," he purred, eyes lingering on her with oily admiration, "such beauty as yours should not be wasted in obscurity. Come to dinner next week at my residence—I'll gather dukes and earls, the finest company. A lady like you would shine there... perhaps even find a suitable husband. A bishop's recommendation opens many doors, eh?"
Eliza smiled demurely, playing the part.
"Your Grace is too kind. I would be honored."
He turned to Reginald, puffing out his chest.
"And you, sir—your devotion is commendable. I could speak a word in the right ears—perhaps a mention for higher service in the hierarchy. An archdeaconry, even? The Church rewards those who... contribute generously."
Reginald inclined his head, voice smooth as silk.
"Your Grace flatters us. We shall provide good service indeed. The Lord will not be disappointed."
Harrowby boomed with laughter.
"Excellent! More wine, then—to future elevations!"
An hour more passed in this vein—the bishop regaling them with tales of his "triumphs," growing bolder.

"Once, a factory owner donated a fortune 'for the widows.' I invested it wisely—in a little vineyard in France. The widows got prayers; I got vintage claret. God's economy, my friends!"
The assembly chuckled obligingly, masks of admiration hiding the growing tension.

Suddenly, the chamber doors opened. Four hooded members entered silently, faces shadowed, moving with purpose. They seized Harrowby by the arms, dragging him from his chair despite his bulk.
"What is this?" he bellowed, face purpling. "Unhand me! What are you doing? I order you to stop this instant!"
The bishop thrashed, wine spilling from his overturned glass, but the hooded figures hauled him inexorably toward the offering room. Reginald rose calmly, signaling the others. Eliza followed with the twenty now cloaked members, hoods raised, forming a solemn procession. In the vaulted chamber, the massive stone slab waited under flickering torchlight. Harrowby was forced onto it, ropes binding his wrists and ankles swiftly. Candles were lit in a ring—black wax dripping like tears.The bishop's eyes bulged with crazed anger, spittle flying as he roared.
"This is blasphemy! Release me at once! You madmen—what is the meaning of this? I'll have you all hanged! The Archbishop will hear of this outrage!"
Reginald stepped forward, arms raised, voice resonant and unyielding.
"Witness, O Lucifer, Bringer of Eternal Light, this man of blasphemy—the greedy son of the abyss! Behold his crimes: leeching from the poor, preaching mercy while hoarding gold, mocking the suffering with his gluttony!"
Harrowby strained against the ropes.
"Lies! Heresy! You'll burn in hell for this!"
Reginald continued, fierce and unwavering.
"He is the Demiurge's perfect servant—tyrant in silk robes, devourer of the weak. We condemn this vile creature! Set him free from the corrupt body, that his soul might be free—purged in the black flame, transmuted for the greater dawn!"
The assembly chanted softly:
"Purge the impure... hail the Light!"
Four members advanced, silver daggers gleaming—ritual blades etched with serpents.
Harrowby screamed,
"No! Mercy! I'll give you anything—gold, titles—stop!"
The daggers plunged in unison: two into the heart, deep and twisting; the others slitting the throat in a swift arc. Blood fountained, hot and dark, soaking the slab. The bishop gurgled, eyes wide in final terror, body convulsing once before stilling.Silence fell, broken only by dripping blood. The four withdrew the blades, then expertly excised the heart—still faintly twitching—and the liver, placing them reverently in a waiting silver bowl.Reginald's voice echoed solemnly:
"The offering is accepted. The light advances."
Eliza stood among them, the metallic tang filling her nostrils, the teachings holding firm: justice served, corruption cleansed. The bishop's arrogance silenced forever.

The ritual concluded in the main altar room, the bishop's bloodied remains cleared away with reverent efficiency. The assembly gathered in a circle, voices rising in final prayers and chants—low, rhythmic Latin invocations echoing off the stone vaults:
"Lucifer invicte, accipe sacrificium... purga mundum falsi luminis... ave stella matutina, libera nos ab tyranno."
The words wove a solemn tapestry, sealing the offering, the air thick with incense and the metallic tang of blood.Reginald raised his arms one last time.
"The Light has accepted. Go forth, brothers and sisters, bearers of the eternal flame."
They returned to the dining chamber, the table replenished with simpler fare—bread, cheese, fruit, and wine—to ground the spirit after the intensity. Conversation was subdued, satisfied murmurs of the deed's righteousness. Soon, members dispersed into the night, cloaks drawn against the chill.Eliza boarded her carriage, the ride home a quiet cocoon. She contemplated the bishop's end: his greed exposed, his corruption cleansed. Necessary, she reassured herself—evil purged for the greater dawn. The light demanded balance; hypocrisy could not stand. Satisfaction settled over her, warm as the carriage's blankets. Home at last, she undressed and fell into deep, untroubled sleep.Weeks passed in steady rhythm: days at the office drafting articles, evenings with laudanum-laced tea and quiet meditation before her bronze Pan. Saturdays brought the catacombs—rites, feasts, the growing bond of the Order.

One Saturday, after the gathering, Reginald drew her aside.
"Eliza, come to my home tomorrow evening. Private meditations—deeper communion with the light."She met his gaze, a thrill stirring.
"I would be honored, my lord."
The next day she prepared carefully: a bath scented with rose oil, her finest gown of deep burgundy silk, hair pinned with pearl combs. The carriage ride to Belgravia felt shorter this time, the elegant facades welcoming.The servant admitted her; Reginald awaited in the marble foyer, smiling warmly.
"Come, child. Dinner first—then the true work."
He led her to a lavish private dining room: crystal chandeliers casting prismatic light, walls hung with tapestries of alchemical symbols, a table set for two with silver and porcelain. Servants glided in silently, serving course after course: clear consommé, poached salmon in herb butter, tender lamb with rosemary, delicate soufflé, all paired with exquisite wines—a crisp Sancerre, then a robust Bordeaux.They chatted lightly at first—of London's endless fog, the hypocrisy in Parliament, the Order's quiet growth. Reginald's eyes lingered on her often.
"You bloom in the light, Eliza. It suits you."After the servants cleared the plates and withdrew, Reginald rose.
"Now, come—I will show you treasures few eyes behold."
He led her to his private library: shelves towering to the ceiling, filled with leather-bound volumes behind glass. He unlocked a cabinet, revealing rare grimoires.
"Behold," he said reverently, lifting one.
"The Picatrix—Arabic stellar magic, translated in the courts of Alfonso the Wise. Invocations to planetary spirits, talismans for dominion."
Eliza traced the embossed cover.
"It's beautiful. Forbidden power."He nodded, selecting another.

"The Grand Grimoire—said to contain the true pact with Lucifuge Rofocale, prime minister of hell. Not for the faint."
"And this," he continued, opening a yellowed folio, "the Arbatel of Magic—Renaissance Olympic spirits, paths to divine wisdom without blood."

They spoke softly of the texts—their histories, hidden meanings, how each echoed the Light's rebellion.Finally, Reginald closed the cabinet and guided her to a cushioned alcove, bidding her sit. Candlelight played across his scarred face as he knelt before her, taking her hands.
"Eliza... not to all does the light appear so vividly. You are special—a pure soul, untouched by the world's deeper rot yet strong enough to bear its truths."
She searched his eyes.
"What do you mean?"He squeezed her hands gently.
"The Lord wants you to carry the light. You are the necessary flower for the Order—a chosen vessel, blooming in darkness to seed the new dawn. Your visions, your understanding—they mark you. Will you accept this role, child? To nurture the flame within, perhaps even... bear its fruit?"
Eliza's breath caught, the words resonating deep in her core—the warmth of the inner light flaring in answer.
"Yes," she whispered. "I will."

Servants entered silently, bearing a silver tray with fine porcelain teacups, a steaming pot of Darjeeling, and delicate biscuits glazed with honey. They poured for Reginald and Eliza, bowing before withdrawing, the door closing with a soft click.Reginald lifted his cup, inhaling the fragrant steam.
"A fine blend—from Assam plantations. The Empire's gifts, though stained with blood."Eliza sipped, the warmth soothing. "
Everything seems stained these days. Yet the light cleanses.
"He smiled, eyes lingering on her. "Indeed. You grow wiser each visit."
They talked idly for a while—of recent rites, the Order's quiet expansions, London's endless scandals in the papers. Reginald set his cup down.
"Come, let me show you the rest of the apartment. There is more to see upstairs."
He led her up the grand staircase, carpeted in thick Persian silk that muffled their steps. First, the study: walls lined with mahogany shelves groaning under rare volumes, a massive globe of the world, astrolabes gleaming on desks.
"My sanctuary for contemplation," he said, tracing a finger along a leather spine.Then guest chambers—opulent beds with canopied drapes, fireplaces carved with serpents.
"For visiting brethren from afar," he explained.Finally, a large upstairs living room: high ceilings, velvet settees before a roaring fire, windows overlooking Belgravia's moonlit gardens. They sat close on a thick bearskin rug, the flames crackling softly. Reginald turned to her, voice intimate.
"Meditation is the key to faster contact with the light—beyond rituals, a direct communion. I will teach you recitations to focus the mind."
He recited slowly:
"Lux aeterna, ex abysso surge... stella matutina, illumina animam meam..."

His words rolled like incantation.Eliza repeated, the syllables vibrating in her chest.
"It feels... closer already."
"Good," he murmured.
"Posture is vital."
He moved behind her, hands gentle on her shoulders, pressing her back straight.
"Spine aligned, like the serpent ascending."
He positioned her hands palms up on her knees.
"Breathe slowly—inhale the light, exhale the chains."
Their eyes met; the firelight danced in his scar. He leaned in, lips brushing hers.
"The light unites us."
Eliza kissed back, hunger rising—the repressed desires of months unleashed. They sank to the rug, gowns and robes discarded in urgent whispers, bodies entwining in passionate rhythm. It was fervent, almost sacred—flesh as vessel for the light, ecstasy transcending the material.
Afterward, breathless and entwined, Reginald rose and poured cognac from a decanter, handing her a glass before settling beside her again.
"In my youth," he began, voice low, "during the Mutiny in India, I saw a fakir meditate upon a bed of nails—unmoved by pain. He taught me: suffering is illusion, the body a mere garment. That's when the light first whispered to me."
Eliza nestled closer. "And the scar?"
"A jezail bullet in Afghanistan. The hakim who saved me spoke of Lucifer as the healer of wounds—the one who brings fire to cauterize corruption."
She traced the scar gently.
"You've carried the light through so much darkness."
He smiled, pulling her near.
"And now, with you—the chosen vessel—it burns brighter."
They sipped cognac, stories flowing into the night, the fire's glow mirroring the warmth within.

Lord Reginald Blackwood was born in 1845 to one of England's ancient families, the Blackwoods of Somerset—a lineage tracing back to Norman conquerors, though by the Victorian era their estates had dwindled to a crumbling manor overshadowed by industrial smog. His father, Viscount Harlan Blackwood, was a stern Freemason obsessed with Rosicrucian lore, filling the household library with grimoires like the Picatrix and Arbatel of Magic, whispering of hidden knowledge passed down from Renaissance alchemists. Reginald's mother, Lady Eleanora, descended from a line rumored to include a 17th-century witch burned in Lancashire, suffered visions she called "the light's echoes," which the family dismissed as hysteria but which young Reginald secretly believed.
Orphaned at twelve when a cholera outbreak ravaged the estate—sparing only him and a distant uncle—Reginald was shipped to Eton, where he excelled in classics and languages, devouring Ovid and Virgil for their veiled mysticism. But the "family curse" stirred early: nightmares of fallen angels and serpents coiling through flames, visions that sharpened his intuition but isolated him from peers. At Cambridge (Magdalene College, 1863–1866), he delved into Oriental studies, smuggling forbidden texts like the Grand Grimoire and Arabic

translations of stellar magic, joining secretive Masonic lodges that hinted at deeper brotherhoods.
The turning point came in 1867: commissioned into the 17th Lancers, Reginald shipped to India amid the Empire's colonial grip. In the Punjab, during skirmishes following the Mutiny's echoes, he witnessed horrors that shattered his Christian facade—villages razed, holy men invoking ancient gods against British rifles. Wounded in a jezail ambush near Kandahar (1878, Second Anglo-Afghan War), a bullet tore his cheek, leaving the livid scar that would define him. A Pashtun hakim saved him not with surgery but opium-laced rites, chanting in forgotten Persian tongues over alchemical herbs. In fevered visions, Reginald beheld Lucifer—not as devil, but as radiant rebel, the Morning Star fallen to illuminate humanity's chains.
Recovered but changed, he returned to London in 1880, renouncing his military commission and inheriting a fortune from his uncle. He immersed in the city's occult underbelly: briefly flirting with the Theosophical Society under Helena Blavatsky (whose Eastern mysticism resonated with his Indian epiphanies), but finding it too passive. Instead, he gravitated to the nascent Hermetic Order of the Mountain (founded 1840s), rubbing shoulders with figures like William Wynn and Samuel Liddell. Disillusioned by their structured Kabbalah—too tame for his apocalyptic visions—he splintered off in 1881, founding the Order of the Fallen Star beneath St. Paul's crypts, drawing disillusioned aristocrats, opium-addled artists, and desperate immigrants into a radical inversion: Lucifer as liberator, rituals blending Gnostic rebellion with Sumerian invocations.
Tied to the Ripper murders through Whitechapel's shadows, Reginald saw the killings as omens—chaotic harbingers of the Empire's moral collapse, though he denied direct involvement. His followers' opportunistic organ harvests fueled rites, but the true killer eluded him, a phantom mirroring his own hidden war. Haunted by his scar—a constant reminder of flesh's frailty—Reginald pursued the grand summoning: an apocalypse to cleanse London's sins, his colonial traumas alchemized into divine purpose. In Eliza, he saw the vessel to birth this new dawn—a scarred harbinger, forever balancing light and abyss.

Eliza lingered in the upstairs living room long after their intimate communion, the bearskin rug warm beneath them, the fire's embers casting a soft glow on Reginald's scarred face. They chatted softly, wrapped in blankets, the cognac loosening tongues.
"The light chose you early," Reginald murmured, tracing her hand.
"In India, I first glimpsed it amid the blood and dust—whispers in the opium haze, promising rebellion against the Empire's chains."
Eliza leaned against him.
"And now? With the Order grown, do you see the dawn nearing?"
He nodded.
"Branches in Paris whisper of revolution; Moscow's cell grows bold. But you, Eliza—the vessel—will birth the true flame."
As night deepened, the grandfather clock chimed midnight. Eliza dressed reluctantly.
"I must go."Reginald kissed her forehead.
"The carriage waits. Return soon, child."

Home in Bloomsbury, the streets silent, she measured twenty drops of laudanum—more than usual, to quiet the lingering echoes of passion and purpose. The mist claimed her; sleep was deep, untroubled.Morning came crisp; she dressed and walked to Fleet Street, the air biting with winter promise. At the office, she drafted an article on rising poorhouse scandals—overcrowded workhouses, starvation amid plenty—words flowing with newfound fervor.
Percy hovered, handing her tea.
"You look... rested," he said cautiously.
"That cult business sorted?"
Eliza avoided his eyes, focusing on her quill.
"It's not what you think. Turns out there's no Jack the Ripper in the Order—nothing like that. They have other initiatives: soup kitchens in Whitechapel, lodgings for the homeless. Good works, Percy."
He scratched his chin, spectacles slipping.
"Sounds noble. But you're different lately—distant. I'm worried, Eliza. Laudanum? Late nights?"
She forced a smile.
"Just busy. Trust me—it's helping me see clearly."
Percy nodded reluctantly, but his frown lingered.
"If you say so. Just... be careful.
"Mid-afternoon, a letter arrived—sealed with golden wax, embossed with a dawn emblem. Eliza opened it discreetly:
"The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn warns the Fallen Star: cease your reckless invocations. You invite true chaos, not controlled enlightenment. Our rites preserve balance; yours summon the abyss. Desist, or face opposition. — W.W.W."
Her pulse quickened. The Golden Dawn—historically whispered in London's occult circles since 1888, practitioners of structured Kabbalah and astrology—viewed the Fallen Star as dangerous chaotes, wild summoners risking cosmic disorder rather than harmonious magic. Rivalry simmered; Reginald had mentioned them dismissively as "tame scholars." Now conflict brewed—perhaps raids on rites, stolen grimoires, or worse.Eliza pocketed the letter, resolve hardening. The light would prevail; chaos was the path to rebirth. Yet doubt flickered: was the Order's fire enlightenment, or the spark that would consume them all?

Eliza wrapped up her day at the office with mechanical efficiency, proofreading a final article on dockworker strikes before handing it to Percy.
"That's it for me," she said, gathering her cloak. "Early evening plans."
Percy glanced up from his plates, concern etching his brow.
"Again? Take care out there—the streets aren't safe."
She nodded absently, the Golden Dawn's letter burning in her pocket like a hidden ember.
"I will."
The carriage ride to St. Paul's was swift, the winter dusk closing in early, gas lamps blooming along the route like false stars. She descended the familiar stairs into the catacombs, the damp air welcoming her like an old embrace. The chamber was quiet—only a handful of members tending incense braziers, their robes whispering as they moved.Reginald was in his private

alcove, poring over a yellowed grimoire by candlelight. He looked up as she approached, scarred face softening.
"Eliza. What brings you early?"
She pulled the letter from her pocket, the golden wax seal unbroken no longer.
"This arrived at the office. From the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. A warning."
He took it, scanning the words with a faint smirk.
"Cease our invocations? They call us chaotes—inviting 'true chaos'?"
He crumpled it dismissively and tossed it into the brazier, where it flared briefly before curling to ash. "Rubbish. The Golden Dawn are parlor magicians—playing at Kabbalah with their colored robes and safe symbols. They fear what they cannot control."
Eliza hesitated.
"But they threaten opposition. What if—?"
Reginald waved a hand.
"Let them. Our paths diverged long ago. The Golden Dawn, founded just last year by Westcott and his ilk, clings to structured magic—hierarchies, grades, invocations bound by Rosicrucian rules. They seek harmony with the cosmos, balance in the spheres. We? We embrace the fall—the chaos that births true light. They view us as dangerous radicals, inviting the abyss rather than taming it."
She nodded slowly, the letter's words still echoing.
"Why the rivalry? Can't occult paths coexist?"
He chuckled darkly.
"The occult world is fractured, child—competitive as any court. Resources are scarce: grimoires, artifacts, acolytes. We've stolen initiates from them—disillusioned seekers craving more than their tepid rites. And now, an escalation: they've stolen an artifact from us. The Sigil of Azazel—a bronze amulet from ancient Sumer, key to our summoning rites. Smuggled from their Reading Room vaults last week. Petty theft, but it wounds."
Eliza's eyes widened.
"What will we do?"Reginald's gaze hardened.
"Retrieve it. Their 'opposition' will be met with our fire. The world of hidden knowledge is no gentle brotherhood—it's a battlefield of egos and ambitions, where one order's light is another's shadow."
The calm from earlier wavered slightly, but Reginald's assurance steadied her. The occult realm was indeed competitive, alliances fragile, rivalries bitter. Yet the Fallen Star's path felt truer—bold, unyielding. She resolved to stand firm as the conflict brewed.

Reginald's dismissal of the letter lingered in Eliza's mind as she left the catacombs that evening, the crumpled ash in the brazier a symbol of his contempt. Yet the Golden Dawn's warning gnawed at her—their accusation of "true chaos" versus the Order's controlled apocalypse. The occult world, she realized, was no unified brotherhood but a labyrinth of rival factions, each guarding its version of truth with jealous fervor. Over the following weeks, the rivalry escalated beyond words. Whispers reached the Order: initiates poached, grimoires vanishing from private libraries. Reginald convened urgent meetings in the crypt, his scar livid in torchlight.
"The Golden Dawn fears our boldness," he declared to the assembly.

"They chain magic to their grades and symbols—0=0 to 10=1, safe hierarchies—while we embrace the fall, the raw invocation that shatters veils."
Eliza listened intently, the conflict crystallizing her loyalty. The Golden Dawn, with its Isis-Urania Temple in London since early 1888, drew intellectuals like Yeats and Florence Farr—practitioners of ceremonial magic, tarot, and astral projection, viewing chaos as destructive force to be tamed. The Fallen Star, older and radical since 1881, invited that chaos as liberator—Lucifer unbound, rituals raw and ecstatic. They saw the Dawn as elitist cowards; the Dawn branded the Star as reckless summoners risking demonic incursion.The breaking point came one fog-shrouded night. A trusted member returned bloodied from a Golden Dawn gathering he had infiltrated—beaten for "heresy."
Worse: the Sigil of Azazel, the ancient Sumerian bronze amulet central to their grand summoning, had been stolen from the crypt's hidden vault. Reginald raged in private council: "They took it during our last rite—slipped in disguised as seekers. Petty theft to cripple us."

Eliza felt the fracture acutely. Sent on reconnaissance to a public lecture by a Dawn associate, she witnessed their polished rituals—incense, wands, balanced invocations—contrasted with the Order's blood and fire. Competition was fierce: acolytes lured away, artifacts contested like relics in a holy war. The occult realm was fractured indeed—ambition, ego, ideology clashing in shadows while the mundane world slumbered above.Reginald vowed retaliation: "We reclaim the sigil. Their 'controlled magic' will shatter against our light."
Eliza nodded, resolve hardening. The rivalry showed her the world's true face—competitive, unforgiving. Only the boldest path prevailed. The Fallen Star would burn brighter.

The rivalry with the Golden Dawn simmered like a cauldron on the boil, whispers of retaliation echoing through the catacombs. Reginald, ever the strategist, gathered a small council after a Saturday rite.
"They have stolen our sigil," he said, voice low and fierce, the scar twisting with his scowl. "We cannot let it stand. Chaos they fear—we shall give them a taste."
He selected a loyal member—a wiry artist named Victor Hale, known for his stealth and unyielding faith.
"Strike at their heart," Reginald instructed.
"One of their inner circle—let it be a message carved in flesh."
Hale nodded, eyes gleaming.
"The light demands it, my lord."
In the early morning hours of a fog-shrouded Tuesday, Hale shadowed a Golden Dawn adept—Dr. Elias Thorne, a mid-level initiate rumored to have orchestrated the sigil's theft—from his Bloomsbury lodgings. As Thorne hurried through a narrow alley off Tottenham Court Road, Hale struck: a swift garrote from behind to silence him, then a dagger plunged into the back. Thorne gasped, collapsing to the wet cobbles. Hale knelt, carving a five-pointed star deep into the man's forehead, blood welling like dark ink.
"For the Fallen," Hale whispered, vanishing into the mist.
The message spread like wildfire through London's occult underbelly—the star a blatant sigil of retribution. Whispers reached the Golden Dawn's Isis-Urania Temple:
"The chaotes have drawn first blood."

Two days later, a hooded emissary from the Dawn—a scholarly woman named Lydia Voss—contacted the Order through a neutral occult bookseller in Soho. Voss requested a parley
"We seek resolution before more light is extinguished."
Reginald convened the council.
"They sue for peace—good. Eliza, you shall negotiate. Your grace and insight will serve us well."Eliza felt a thrill of purpose.
"I am ready, my lord."
The meeting occurred in a neutral venue—a dimly lit back room of the bookseller's shop, shelves groaning with forbidden tomes. Voss arrived cloaked, her face sharp and wary, accompanied by a silent bodyguard. Eliza sat across from her, Reginald's instructions clear: demand the sigil's return, concede nothing.Voss spoke first, voice clipped.
"The death of Brother Thorne was barbaric. Your Order invites chaos that endangers us all—demonic incursions, uncontrolled forces. We practice controlled magic; you summon the abyss recklessly."
Eliza met her gaze steadily.
"And yet you stole our sigil—the Sigil of Azazel—to hobble us. That is not balance; that is cowardice. Return it, and peace may hold."
Voss hesitated, glancing at her companion.
"We took it to prevent catastrophe. Your invocations risk tearing the veil. But... we agree to terms: the sigil returned, no further aggression. A truce, for the occult world's sake."
Eliza nodded coolly.
"The light accepts—on those terms."
Voss produced a wrapped bundle from her cloak—the ancient bronze amulet, humming faintly with power.
"Take it. And warn your master: chaos devours its own children."
Eliza accepted it, the metal warm against her skin.
"We shall see whose way endures."
The truce held, fragile as glass—the sigil restored, the rivalry simmering but contained. Eliza returned to the catacombs triumphant, the artifact in hand. Reginald embraced her.
"Well done, child. The light prevails through wisdom as through fire."
Yet in quiet moments, Eliza wondered if peace was illusion—the fractured occult world ever teetering on the edge of war.

An Old Friend

Eliza arrived at the office the next morning pale and quiet, the previous night's revelations still swirling in her mind like the catacombs' incense. She settled at her desk, mechanically sorting clippings, drafting a short piece on a charity scandal—ironic, given the bishop's recent fate. Percy watched her from across the room, his usual banter absent, replaced by a furrowed brow.
"You look like you've seen a ghost," he said finally, bringing her tea.
"Late nights again? And that bottle I saw in your bag—laudanum?"
She forced a smile.

"Just tired, Percy. Deadlines."
He didn't press, but his worry deepened. Over the following days, it grew unbearable: Eliza's absences lengthened, her eyes distant, skin sallow from increased drops—fifteen, then twenty nightly. She spoke vaguely of "research," evading questions about the Order, her once-sharp articles turning perfunctory. Percy could stand it no longer. One foggy Saturday evening, as Eliza slipped out early with a murmured excuse, he followed—hat pulled low, trailing her carriage on foot and omnibus through the darkening streets to Ludgate Hill.
Hidden in the shadows opposite St. Paul's, he watched her descend through the small oak door. Curiosity warred with fear; he waited hours in the chill, until muffled chants echoed faintly from below. Then, a procession emerged late into the night—robed figures bearing torches, marching silently toward the East End. Percy crept closer, heart pounding, catching glimpses: inverted symbols on cloaks, a hooded leader intoning Latin.
One figure paused near a beggar slumped in an alley, dagger flashing briefly—mercy or murder?
Percy couldn't tell, but the scene chilled him: ritualistic, deliberate.He retreated, shaken, waiting for Eliza's return near dawn. When she emerged, disheveled and luminous-eyed, he stepped from the shadows.
"Eliza—wait."
She froze, recognition dawning.
"Percy? What are you—?"
"I followed you. Saw enough. Robed figures, torches, chants in the dark. That 'good works' group of yours? It's a cult—dangerous. Knives in alleys? Blood on their hands?"
Her face paled.
"You don't understand. It's not—"
"Not what? Devil worship? Murder disguised as charity?"
His voice cracked with alarm.
"You're in deep—withdrawals, lies, disappearing nights. Laudanum to forget what you've seen? Come away from it, Eliza. Before it's too late."
She stepped back, torn—loyalty to the light clashing with old friendship.
"Percy, please. It's salvation, not damnation. The world above is the true evil—hypocrisy, poverty, tyranny. We fight it."
He grabbed her arm gently.
"Fight it with me—journalism, truth in print. Not this darkness. You're changing, losing yourself."
Tears welled in her eyes, doubt flickering.
"I... I can't. The light—it's real."
Percy released her, voice breaking.
"Then God help you. But if you vanish completely, I'll drag you out myself—or go to the police."
He turned into the fog, leaving her alone under the cathedral's shadow, the confrontation a crack in her resolve—the first real fracture in the Order's hold.

Percy sat alone in the dim office long after closing, the gas lamp hissing softly as he pored over scattered notes and clippings. Eliza's evasion that morning had been the final straw—her

distant eyes, the faint tremor in her hands, the way she brushed off his concerns with vague assurances about "good works." He knew the name now: Lord Reginald Blackwood, whispered in connection to that shadowy group beneath St. Paul's.
"The Order of the Fallen Star," he muttered, scribbling it down.
It sounded like something from a penny dreadful, but Eliza's transformation was real—laudanum, late nights, a glow in her eyes that unnerved him. He had to dig deeper, for her sake.By dusk, he pulled on his coat and headed to Limehouse, the fog thick as gin breath. The Golden Poppy's faded sign swung in the chill wind; inside, the same heavy air of smoke and despair. Percy scanned the hazy room—bodies slumped on mattresses, hookers lounging wearily—until he spotted Silas Crowther behind the counter, polishing brass lamps with a rag.
"Evening, Mr Silas," Percy said, sliding onto a stool.
"I come to you with a request, or rather a plead, I am friend of Miss Hawthorne who came here a while back."
Silas's pockmarked face creased in a shrewd smile. "Aye, the pretty lady askin' after gentlemen. What brings you here?"
Percy leaned in, voice low.
"It's about her—Eliza. She's mixed up with Lord Reginald Blackwood. With all due respect for his privacy and yours, I think she's in danger. A modest sum for information?"
He slid five shillings across the counter—a week's wage for a docker, but worth it.Silas pocketed the coins without a blink.
"Generous. Aye, I remember Eliza—bright eyes, sharp questions. Blackwood? He's been comin' here years, since '81 or so. Likes the Yunnan—pure stuff.
Silas glanced around, lowering his voice.
" Looked into him meself once. Fellow soldier from the colonies—opium regular here—told tales after a pipe. Blackwood in India, '70s—Lancers, leader in skirmishes. Committed murders on civilians, cruel ones. Villages burned, women and kids... not war, but sport. Said Blackwood had a cult even then—members from Afghan tribes, Indian mystics. Called it the Order of the Fallen Star. He was the leader—rituals in the hills, invoking old gods, or devils."
Percy's eyes widened.
"The Order of the Fallen Star? That's the name now—here in London."
Silas chuckled darkly.
"Aye, surprised? Cult's ancient, lad—origins in India, thousands of years back. Serpent worshippers, rebel sects against the gods. Blackwood rose as leader, but things soured—too many bodies, British command sniffed it out. He fled, but respected still. Started his branch here—crypts under St. Paul's, drawin' the lost and lofty alike."
Percy swallowed hard.
"And the murders... like the Ripper?"
Silas shrugged. "Dunno 'bout that. But Blackwood's got blood on him—old and new. Watch your friend, scribbler. That light he preaches? Burns hot, but consumes everything."
Percy thanked him, mind reeling, and slipped into the night.
The Order—ancient, murderous, Reginald its scarred prophet. Eliza was deeper than he feared. He vowed to pull her out—before the flame claimed her.

Percy arrived at the British Museum's Reading Room early the next morning, the domed ceiling arching overhead like a vast, indifferent sky. Armed with a reader's ticket and a notebook, he spent hours navigating the endless shelves—pulling volumes on Indian history, British colonial records, and esoteric sects. He skimmed The Imperial Gazetteer of India (1881 edition) for overviews of British campaigns; A History of British India by James Mill (1817), dense with accounts of the Mutiny; colonial memoirs like Personal Adventures During the Indian Rebellion by William Kaye (1873), detailing Punjab skirmishes; and The Religions of India by Edward Washburn Hopkins (1895), though he focused on earlier works for antiquity.Nothing on Blackwood yet, but Percy persisted, cross-referencing with The Golden Bough by James Frazer (1890 draft notes, accessed via special request) for ritual comparisons. Finally, in the Indian mysticism section, he found a cluster of rare texts: The Secret Doctrines of the Tantras by Arthur Avalon (pseudonym for John Woodroffe, an earlier manuscript version from 1880s collections); Hindu Mythology and Religion by John Dowson (1879); and a dusty folio, Arcane Sects of the Subcontinent by Colonel Henry Yule (1871), blending folklore and colonial observations.

He lugged them to a desk, consulting a Sanskrit-English dictionary for unfamiliar terms—naga (serpent), asura (anti-god), rudra (storm deity). Translating passages meticulously, he stumbled upon a chapter in Yule's book on

"Rebellious Cults Against the Devas."

One passage caught his eye:

"Among the shadowed fringes of Vedic lore lies the Order of the Fallen Star—known in ancient Sanskrit as 'Patita Nakshatra Sampradaya'—a sect thought to originate in the Indus Valley around 2500 BCE, predating the Aryan invasions. Little survives from those early days, but fragments in the Rigveda hint at worshippers of destructive forces who rebelled against the devas, the shining gods of order. These asura-venerators exalted fallen celestial beings—stars cast from heaven for defying cosmic tyranny—merging with serpent cults (naga worship) that viewed underground deities as liberators from surface oppression."By the Mauryan era (300 BCE), the Order had evolved, blending with Shaivite traditions where Shiva, as Rudra the destroyer, embodied rebellion against Brahma's creation. Temples in hidden Himalayan caves held rites inverting Vedic sacrifices: blood offerings not to appease gods, but to mock them, consuming flesh to absorb rebellious essence. Colonial reports from the 18th century link them to Thuggee bands—Kali worshippers who strangled travelers as 'offerings' to the goddess of destruction and renewal—though the Fallen Star emphasized intellectual gnosis alongside violence, teaching that the material world was a prison, the body a chain to be shattered."

In the 1870s Punjab uprisings, whispers spoke of a British officer—scarred in battle—reviving the Order, drawing Afghan Pashtuns and Indian mystics into a modern branch. Ancient texts claim the cult's sigil—an inverted star—symbolizes the Morningstar's fall, promising apocalypse to cleanse tyranny.

Percy's hands shook as he copied the passage. Ancient, Indian roots—rebellious gods, destructive rites. Blackwood hadn't founded it; he'd inherited and twisted an age-old shadow. The puzzle darkened; Eliza was ensnared in something far older, far deadlier than he feared.

Percy trudged home through the fog-choked streets, the weight of Silas's revelations pressing on him like the damp air itself. His small lodgings in Clerkenwell felt colder than usual; he lit the gas lamp, brewed a weak cup of tea, and tried to settle into bed. But sleep evaded him. Visions haunted the darkness: Eliza's distant eyes, Blackwood's scarred face imagined from descriptions, ancient serpents coiling in Indian temples, bloodied rituals beneath St. Paul's. He woke every two hours—sweating, heart racing—glancing at the clock's relentless tick. By dawn, exhausted and red-eyed, he gave up, dressed, and headed to the office early.He waited there, pacing the empty room, reheating tea until it turned bitter. Eliza didn't arrive at her usual hour. Nine became ten, ten eleven. At noon, she finally slipped in—pale, movements languid, a faint opium sweetness clinging to her cloak.

"Eliza," Percy said urgently, pulling her into the back room.

"We need to talk. Now."

She sank into a chair, rubbing her temples.

"Percy, I'm tired—"

He thrust his notebook at her, pages filled with frantic scrawl.

"I dug deeper on Blackwood. Went back to the Golden Poppy—Silas talked, for a price. Blackwood's no saint. In India, '70s—massacres on civilians, villages burned for sport. And the Order? Ancient, from India—thousands of years old, serpent cults, rebellious gods. He led a branch there, fled when it turned bloody. Started this London one as his own."

Eliza took the notes doubtfully.

"Silas? The opium den keeper? How trustworthy is—"

"Read this," Percy interrupted, sliding a copied passage from the museum book.

"Order of the Fallen Star—Patita Nakshatra Sampradaya. Origins 2500 BCE, Indus Valley. Worship of asuras, destructive forces rebelling against devas. Merged with naga serpent cults, Shaivite destruction—rituals inverting sacrifices, consuming to absorb power. Ancient as the hills, Eliza."She read slowly, eyes tracing the lines. At first, recognition flickered—principles mirrored the Order's teachings: rebellion against tyranny, inversion of creation, liberation through dissolution. Ritual sacrifice? Not new; the scholar had explained it as transcendence.But the civilian killings troubled her.

"Murders in India... blunt slaughter?"

Percy leaned in.

"Exactly. Not 'necessary cleansing'—war crimes. Silas heard it from a fellow soldier. Blackwood's hands are soaked in innocent blood.

"Eliza frowned, doubt creeping.

"But if the cult's ancient—they've endured millennia. They know truth deeper than empires. Perhaps those killings were... justified? Against colonial oppressors?"

Percy shook his head fiercely.

"Eliza, listen to me. Laudanum's messed with your head—you're not thinking clearly anymore. What happened to you? You went to that opium den for an interview, and now... opium-addicted cult member. Come to your senses! This might not end well—ritual sacrifice is still murder."

His voice echoed in her ears, distant yet piercing—like a voice of reason calling across a vast abyss, trying to wake her from a profound dream. The light's warmth clashed with old memories: her orphaned struggles, journalistic fire, Percy's steadfast friendship.

"I... I don't know," she whispered. "The light feels so real."
"It's illusion," he pleaded.
"Drugs and charisma. Blackwood's twisted an ancient evil into something seductive. Leave it, Eliza—before you're too deep."
She stared at the notes, ancient words blurring. Doubt gnawed stronger now—Silas's tale, Percy's desperation. Was the light divine, or a veil over depravity? The dream wavered, but the pull remained.
"I need time," she said finally, voice small.Percy sighed.
"Take all you need. But I'm here—always."
The confrontation hung heavy, the fracture widening. Eliza's world teetered between awakening and deeper descent.

Eliza spent the day at the office in a fog of exhaustion, her quill scratching listlessly across foolscap as she drafted a mundane piece on rising coal prices. The words blurred; the laudanum's grip lingered, a dull ache behind her eyes. Percy hovered nearby, his concern palpable, but she waved him off.
"Just a headache," she murmured, though the calm from the words warred with deeper fatigue—the weight of secrets, the pull of the light draining her like slow bloodletting.
By middle of the day, she could bear it no longer.
"I'm going home to rest," she told Percy, gathering her things.
He nodded, worry etching his face, but said nothing.
The carriage ride blurred; at her lodgings, she collapsed onto the bed without undressing, sleep claiming her instantly—a few hours of heavy, dreamless void, her body replenishing what the rites demanded.Awakened by the tolling of evening bells, she rose refreshed, the calm holding. She dressed simply and took another carriage to St. Paul's, descending into the catacombs where the assembly awaited—eighty strong now, robes rustling like whispers of flame.Reginald greeted her solemnly, leading her to the altar.
"Tonight, child, your full baptism in the black flame. You shall lead the rite—invoke the manifestation, offer the minor sacrifice. Prove your vessel's worth."
Eliza's heart raced, but the calm steadied her. The chamber filled; torches dimmed to a single black candle. She stood before the slab, a bound lamb trembling at her feet—a "minor" offering, yet significant for her initiation.Reginald handed her the silver dagger, etched with serpents.
"Begin."She raised it, voice steady despite the tremor within.
"O Lucifer, Bringer of Eternal Light, I invoke thee in tongues forgotten—Azathoth et Sothoth, surge ex abysso!"
The words flowed, ancient and guttural, drawn from the grimoires. Followers chanted softly: "Libera nos... hail the flame."Eliza knelt, grasping the lamb's horns.
"Witness this vessel of flesh—pure in its innocence, yet bound to the Demiurge's chains. I offer it to thee, that its blood may kindle the black flame within me!"
The dagger plunged; the lamb bleated once, blood spilling hot over her hands. She carved swiftly—heart and liver excised, placed in the silver bowl with wine poured over. Flames ignited the mixture, blue and fierce.Success came in a rush: visions exploded within her—Lucifer manifesting as a radiant pillar, wings of shadow and starfire enfolding her.

"Chosen vessel," his voice thundered in her soul, "bear my light—rebel, illuminate, consume the false world."
Ecstasy surged, profound and shattering—her psyche fracturing under the intensity, scars etching invisible but permanent: a lifelong whisper of doubt amid faith, nightmares of bloodied hands, a faint, eternal mark on her soul like a branded star.The vision faded; she collapsed, gasping, the assembly murmuring awe. Reginald lifted her.
"The light has claimed you fully."
Eliza rose changed—transformed, the black flame's baptism cementing her devotion. Yet deep within, the psychological wounds lingered: a permanent fracture, guilt's shadow forever trailing the light.

Eliza arrived at the office the next morning with a strange resolve, the baptism's afterglow still warming her veins like lingering embers. The black flame's visions had sealed her devotion, yet Percy's words from weeks past echoed faintly—a distant warning bell. She worked quietly for an hour, drafting notes, before approaching him at his desk.
"Percy," she said softly, leaning close.
"You should join us. The Order—it's not what you think. Last night was my full initiation, a baptism in the black flame. I led the rite myself—sacrificed a lamb, felt the light surge through me. It's real, Percy. Liberation, not darkness. Come with me next Saturday; see for yourself."
Percy's face paled, his spectacles slipping down his nose as he stared at her.
"No damn way, Eliza! I'm not joining this ancient dark cult! Lamb sacrifice? That's barbarism, not enlightenment. Come to your senses—you're not yourself anymore. The laudanum's twisting your mind; it'll kill you if you don't stop."
She recoiled slightly, his words striking like cold water.
"Percy... I... I don't know how to escape the cult anymore. I am related to them—I have participated in the rituals... it is blood related now. The offerings, the invocations—I'm bound."
Percy grabbed her arm gently, voice urgent.
"Blood related? Eliza, that's madness. You must just tell Reginald you're leaving—that's it. Say you're finished with it. Think of something—an illness, a crisis. Walk away before they drag you deeper."
She fell silent, pulling away to her desk, deep thought engulfing her. Could she exit? Reginald's paternal smiles hid steel; she knew too much—the rites, the sacrifices, the grand summoning. Would he let her go, or claim her life as another "necessary cleansing"?
Doubt wormed in: the light felt real, but Percy's reason tugged like an anchor.
"I can't just leave," she whispered to herself later.
"They'd see it as betrayal—the abyss swallowing a fallen soul.
"Yet his words on laudanum struck true. She decided then: drop it slowly, wean off the haze. From twenty drops nightly to ten, then five, then none. She reminded herself—she hadn't been an opium user before; it had crept in with the rites, a crutch for visions. If the light was true, why the belladonna and opium? Were the hallucinations divine, or chemical illusions veiling human horror? The baptism's ecstasy—real communion, or drugged delusion?"
Percy," she said finally, turning back.

"You're right about the laudanum. I'll taper off—starting tonight. But the Order... it's not that simple."
He nodded, relieved yet wary.
"One step at a time. Quit the drops; clear your head. Then we'll figure the rest. I'm with you, Eliza—no matter what.
"She managed a weak smile, the calm from earlier fracturing. The light's pull remained, but doubt had taken root—a seed of rebellion against her own devotion.

Eliza's resolve to quit the laudanum hardened like frost on a windowpane, but the withdrawal proved a cruel thief, stealing her peace drop by drop. She began that very night, measuring only ten drops into her tea instead of twenty—the liquid's bitter sweetness mocking her as she swallowed. Sleep came fitfully, her body protesting the reduction: a restless ache in her limbs, like invisible strings pulling taut, and a faint nausea coiling in her stomach. She woke before dawn, sweating despite the December chill, her nightgown clinging like a second skin. Hot flushes alternated with shivers, goosebumps rippling across her arms as though the room breathed cold malice.The next day at the office, the symptoms sharpened. Her nose ran incessantly, eyes watering as if from unseen smoke; she dabbed at them with a handkerchief, blaming "a chill" when Percy glanced over. Agitation gnawed at her—irritability flaring at minor noises, the scratch of her quill like nails on slate. Confusion clouded her thoughts: sentences in her articles tangled, words eluding her like shadows in fog.
"Focus," she whispered to herself, but the craving whispered back—a subtle torment, not the ravenous beast of full abstinence, but a persistent itch, promising relief in just one more drop.By evening, stomach cramps twisted like knives, forcing her to curl on her bed, vomiting into a basin once, the bile bitter as regret.
She pondered then, in the grip of pain: was the light truly divine, or had the laudanum conjured it all? The visions of Lucifer—radiant, liberating—now seemed suspect, perhaps mere hallucinations born of opium's deceit. Belladonna sharpened edges, but laudanum wove the dream; without them, would the flame endure?
Doubt crept in with the aches: the Order's rites—blood, inversion—felt raw without the haze, human depravity stripped bare. Poverty's grind, the Empire's cruelties—they justified rebellion, but murder? The bishop's screams echoed faintly, no longer muffled by euphoria. Yet reassurances surfaced amid the torment. The light had bloomed before heavy use; her meditations at home, sober, still stirred warmth. Withdrawal was the body's rebellion against freedom—the Demiurge's chains fighting back.
"Endure," she told herself, reducing to five drops the next night.
Insomnia struck then—nights of staring at the ceiling, dilated pupils straining in the dark, anxiety whispering failures: orphan, addict, murderer by proxy. Muscle aches spread, a deep throb in her back and legs, as if her bones rejected the soul within.Days blurred: from five drops to none, diarrhea and vomiting wracking her frame, agitation peaking in outbursts at Percy—
"Leave it!" she snapped once over spilled ink.
But clarity emerged with the pain: thoughts sharpened, the light's call purer, unfiltered by chemical veils. Permanent scars lingered—cravings that might never fade, a psychological

echo of dependency—but she emerged stronger, the withdrawal a baptism of its own, forging doubt into tempered faith. The light endured, real beyond the haze.

After a few weeks of disciplined withdrawal, Eliza had finally broken free from the laudanum's grip. The process had been grueling—nights of sweat-soaked sheets, days of gnawing irritability and fogged thoughts—but she persisted, dropping from ten to five drops, then none. The cravings lingered like faint echoes, a subtle itch in her veins, but her mind cleared, the world sharpening into focus without the chemical veil. Doubts that had been muffled now surfaced starkly: the rituals' blood, the bishop's screams, the organ harvests—all real, unfiltered by haze. Yet the light's warmth remained, a quiet ember, pulling her back despite the scars.

She hadn't attended St. Paul's for two weeks—skipping the Saturday gatherings, claiming illness in a brief note to Reginald. Nobody inquired; no hooded messenger at her door, no urgent summons. The silence unnerved her—did they sense her wavering, or was she insignificant? Percy had noticed her improved color, her steadier hands, and pressed gently: "You're looking better—no more drops?" She nodded, evading deeper questions, the Order's secrets a wall between them.This Saturday, curiosity and compulsion won. She dressed simply, took a carriage to Ludgate Hill as dusk fell, the dome looming like a judgmental sentinel. Descending the stairs, the damp air felt familiar yet distant, like returning to a childhood home changed by time.

The crypt was alive with energy—eighty members milling, torches casting restless shadows. Reginald greeted her warmly, though his scarred eyes searched hers.

"Eliza—welcome back. The light missed you."

They moved to the altar chamber after preliminary chants. Reginald addressed the assembly, voice resonant.

"Brothers and sisters, the grand summoning nears. Synchronized rites across our branches—in Manchester, Paris, even distant Moscow—will trigger societal collapse and rebirth. Fires in churches, like our recent purification, will spread; poisonings of influential Christians—deacons, mayors—who hoard while the poor starve. We usher in the apocalypse: chaos to cleanse the Empire's rot."

Eliza's heart quickened, doubts swelling. The light had sustained her through withdrawal, but this—escalation to widespread violence—felt overwhelming. She didn't condemn the Order; their fight against hypocrisy resonated, but the weight pressed heavy: blood on her hands, visions that now seemed too vivid, too demanding.Reginald continued, eyes ablaze:

"I've walked Whitechapel and the docks these weeks, sowing seeds among the unemployed—instigating anger against the government. Whispers in taverns, pamphlets in alleys: 'Rise against the tyrants who feast while you starve.' Unemployment is our weapon—the poor's rage will ignite the flames we fan."

The assembly murmured approval, but Eliza felt a quiet fracture.

“It is too much—the light's promise of liberation now tangled in human suffering I can no longer ignore. Yet leaving? Impossible. I am bound, vessel or not.”she thought.

The calm from withdrawal held, but beneath it, a storm brewed.

The weeks following Reginald's announcement passed in a tense, deliberate rhythm, the Order's preparations unfolding like a slow-burning fuse. Eliza attended each Saturday rite, her withdrawal complete—the laudanum bottle discarded, her mind sharp and unclouded for the first time in months. Clarity brought unease - the light's warmth endured in meditation, but the grand summoning's scale loomed larger without chemical softening.
Doubts multiplied—quiet, persistent whispers questioning if apocalypse truly liberated or merely unleashed chaos upon the innocent.Reginald moved with renewed fervor, his absences from the crypts frequent.
"I walk among the people," he confided to the inner circle one evening, scar livid in torchlight.
"Whitechapel, the docks, Seven Dials—where unemployment festers like open wounds. I speak in taverns, slip pamphlets into hands: 'The government feasts while you starve. Rise against the tyrants who hoard your labor.' Their anger is ripe—seeds sown for the harvest."
Eliza listened, the plan crystallizing: synchronized rituals across branches—fires in provincial churches, poisonings of influential clergy—to coincide with instigated unrest. London's poor, inflamed by whispers of rebellion, would erupt; the Empire's facade would crack, moral collapse accelerating the rebirth.One night after a minor rite—candles and chants, no blood—she lingered with Reginald.
"The people... will they suffer in this chaos?"He regarded her steadily.
"Suffering births awakening, child. The poor already endure—the workhouse, the streets. Our flames will burn away the false order, freeing them from chains they scarcely see."She nodded, doubts assuaged yet not erased. The light demanded faith; clarity revealed its cost.Reports trickled in over gatherings: a church in Lambeth scorched by "accidental" fire, arson suspected; a vicar in Clerkenwell fallen ill from tainted communion wine, whispers of poison. Reginald smiled at each—
"The branches act. The summoning nears."
Eliza felt the escalation like a tightening noose—excitement laced with dread. The Order's ancient roots justified it all.
“Rebellion against tyranny, as in India millennias ago. Yet the human toll gnawed - beggars whipped into fury, innocents caught in flames.”
“Am I fit for this vessel's role, or crumbling under its weight?” Eliza pondered.
The city simmered, unrest brewing in whispers and pamphlets.
Reginald's seeds took root—unemployment riots echoing Bloody Sunday's ghosts, radical voices growing bolder. The culmination approached, London's streets a powder keg awaiting the Order's spark.

The seeds Reginald had sown in Whitechapel and the docks took root swiftly as winter deepened, unemployment biting harder with factory closures and frozen ports. Whispers turned to shouts in taverns and alleys:
"The government feasts while we starve!"
Pamphlets—printed anonymously by Order acolytes—circulated, fueling rage against the mayor's indifference and Parliament's debates on Irish Home Rule that ignored London's own starving masses.By mid-December, gatherings swelled in Trafalgar Square, echoing the Bloody Sunday clashes of years past. Thousands assembled—dockers in threadbare coats,

unemployed laborers, women with hollow-eyed children—demanding work, bread, justice. Banners waved.
"No Starvation in the Empire!"
Police lines formed, batons ready, but the crowds pressed forward, chants rising:
"Bread or Blood!"
Riots erupted on a frigid Saturday evening.
Protesters surged against mounted police in the square, stones flying from desperate hands, officers charging with truncheons drawn.
Hundreds injured—heads bloodied, limbs broken—as clashes spilled into adjoining streets: Charing Cross choked with overturned omnibuses, Haymarket's shops looted in fury. The air rang with screams and the crack of batons on bone, fog thick with smoke from overturned braziers.
Reginald, cloaked plainly to blend, joined the throng in Trafalgar Square amid the chaos. He climbed a makeshift platform—an overturned cart—scar hidden under a scarf, voice carrying over the din like a prophet's.
"Brothers and sisters!" he bellowed, arms raised.
"See the tyrants' true face! They hoard gold in palaces while your children freeze! The Empire bleeds you dry for distant wars, yet denies you bread at home! Rise against this false order—the government, the Church, the lords who mock your suffering with their charity sermons!"
The crowd roared approval, fists pumping.
"Down with the mayor! Bread or revolution!"
Reginald's eyes gleamed.
"Unite in anger! Burn the chains of poverty—let chaos cleanse the rot! The time of rebirth is upon us!"
His words ignited fresh surges; protesters charged police lines anew, the square descending into melee. Reginald slipped away as batons fell, satisfaction burning—his instigation bearing fruit, the summoning's chaos unfolding above as planned below.Eliza, watching from the catacombs' reports later, felt the events' weight.
“Necessary fire, or uncontrolled inferno? The light demanded it, yet the human cost echo Percy's warnings.”
Doubt deepened, the riots a mirror of her inner turmoil.

Reginald sat alone in the catacombs' private alcove, the chamber dimly lit by a single brazier, shadows dancing on the ancient stone walls. He waited in meditative silence, hands folded, scar a pale line in the firelight—awaiting news from embedded members in the riots above. Hours passed, the distant rumble of the city filtering faintly through the crypt's depths: muffled shouts, the clash of batons, the thunder of hooves on cobbles.A hooded runner finally arrived, breathless and bloodied.
"My lord—the riots... suppressed. Police charged with fury—mounted officers trampling the crowds, batons cracking skulls. Hundreds beaten bloody, scattered into alleys. Arrests mounting, the square cleared by force."
Reginald's face darkened, disappointment etching deep lines.
"Suppressed? So swiftly?"

The runner nodded.
"Aye. They came prepared—reinforcements from divisions across the city. The people fought brave, but scattered like leaves in the wind."
Reginald rose slowly, pacing the alcove.
"A setback... but not defeat." He murmured to himself, voice hardening with conviction. "More chances will come—the anger festers deeper now, watered by blood. This was the first phase, the spark to kindle greater flames. The people are roused; next time, they will overwhelm."
He knelt before the altar, whispering a prayer to Lucifer.
"O Bringer of Light, forgive this delay. Strengthen thy servants; let chaos rise anew, unquenchable."
Eliza, lingering in the shadows after the report, approached hesitantly.
"Reginald... the events are growing too vast for me. The riots, the blood—I want no more part. I am leaving the Order."
He looked up, eyes calm yet piercing.
"Child, confusion clouds you. We do magnificent work—the light advances. But no one is held against will; the Order is free choice. The Light chose you—you bear its mark. Go if you must, but the secrets remain yours forever. I am saddened to lose such an angel—promising, devout initiate."
Eliza felt the pull of belonging—these people her brothers and sisters, the rites her path to truth.
“I belonged here, but time in the Order has passed, I have found the light within, needing no more the group's chains to sustain it,” she thought.
"Thank you for understanding," she said softly.
"The light... it will guide me still."
Reginald nodded sadly.
"It will, child. Fare well."
She left the catacombs that night, the weight lifting yet lingering—a door closing on blood and flame. The riots' suppression bought time, but the summoning loomed. Eliza walked into the fog, free yet forever marked.

Eliza stepped out into the cold night air, the small oak door closing behind her with a finality that echoed in her chest. The fog wrapped around her like a shroud as she hailed a carriage, the clip-clop of hooves a steady rhythm against the silent streets. Home at last, she lit the gas lamp dimly, the room feeling both familiar and strangely empty.
Her eyes fell on the laudanum bottle on the table—half-full, its dark glass glinting accusingly. A slight hesitancy gripped her; she had been clean for weeks, the clarity hard-won.
"Just one more," the craving whispered, soft as Reginald's voice.
She felt like she had lost someone—or something profound. The Order had been family, purpose, light itself. Leaving it left a void, aching and raw.She took the bottle, hand trembling faintly, and poured five drops into a glass of water. The liquid swirled, bitter promise. She drank it down, the familiar warmth spreading, easing the edges of grief and fear.Sleep came swiftly, dreamless.

The next day at the office, she arrived composed, though the drops lingered as a gentle haze. Percy was at his desk, developing plates; he looked up sharply as she approached.
"I can't believe it," she said quietly, sitting beside him.
"It was this simple. I told Reginald I'm done, and he let me go."
Percy stayed silent for a long moment, his gaze searching her face.
"Yes... or did he? Or did he just say it..."
Eliza froze, a chill blooming in her chest.
"I think... but he said—I think he meant it."
Suspicion gnawed at her, sharp despite the laudanum's cushion.
"This was too simple," she thought.
"I know too much—the rites, the bishop, the summoning. Maybe he trusts me... or maybe not. I'm bound by blood; my hands are stained as theirs."
Percy broke the silence.
"Be careful, Eliza. Cults like that—they don't let go easy. Promise you'll watch your back."
She nodded numbly.
"I will."Returning to her desk, she spread the morning newspapers: headlines screaming of the suppressed riots—
"Police Quell Trafalgar Unrest: Hundreds Injured in Clashes"—accounts of batons and blood, the poor scattered but unbowed.She began writing an article, neutral on the surface but laced with empathy: from the poor people's perspective, their desperation for work, the mayor's indifference, the brutality of charges against starving men.
"The unemployed gather not for violence," she penned, "but for bread—the Empire's promise broken on London's streets."
Percy glanced over later.
"Bold piece. They'll print it?"
"If the editor has a conscience," she replied softly.The laudanum's warmth faded, leaving clarity—and quiet fear. Reginald's words echo.
“You are free to go”.
She pushed the thought down, focusing on the words flowing from her quill—the poor's voice, perhaps her atonement.

Eliza lingered at the office long after the gas lamps dimmed in the street outside, finishing a final draft on the riots' aftermath—careful words, neutral yet sympathetic to the beaten poor. Percy had left hours earlier, his worried glance lingering as he bid her goodnight. The building echoed empty around her; she packed her notes, extinguished the lamp, and stepped into the chill night.The fog hung thick as wool, swallowing sounds and shapes. She hailed a carriage on Fleet Street, climbing in wearily.
"Bloomsbury—Gower Street," she instructed the driver.The carriage rattled forward, hooves muffled on wet cobbles. But soon the route felt wrong—turning south toward the river instead of north.
"Driver—halt! This isn't the way."
The carriage slowed.
"Beg pardon, miss—fog's thick. Wrong turn."
Eliza paid quickly, muttering,

"No harm," and stepped down into the swirling mist.
The carriage vanished almost instantly, swallowed by grey. She pulled her cloak tighter and began walking, familiar streets made strange by the haze—lamps glowing like distant ghosts, footsteps echoing hers alone.Home at last, she climbed the stairs to her room, lit the gas jet, and reached for the laudanum bottle on the table. The craving had returned softly since leaving the Order, a companion in uncertainty. She poured ten drops into water, watching them swirl like dark ink, and drank. The bitterness familiar, the warmth spreading like forgiveness.
She cooked a simple supper—eggs fried with yesterday's bread, a cup of tea—and ate at the small table, the silence comforting. Afterward, she read by lamplight: a volume of Shelley, lines of rebellion and light blurring as the laudanum softened the edges.
Rising to draw the curtains against the night, she paused at the window. The mist pressed close outside, veiling the street in grey. Then—a shap, a hooded figure standing motionless across the road, face shadowed, watching her building with unnatural stillness.Eliza's breath caught. The figure lingered a moment longer, then melted into the fog, vanishing as though never there.She pulled the curtains tight, heart pounding, the laudanum's calm warring with sudden fear. Was it imagination? A warning? Or the Order's eyes, ensuring silence?
She blew out the lamp and lay in the dark, the mist outside thick as secrets, the light within flickering—but enduring.